CLAIR DE LUNE

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A PLAY IN TWO ACTS
AND SIX SCENES

BY

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CHARACTERS

THE COURT

THE QUEEN . .	*Miss Ethel Barrymore*
THE DUCHESS OF BEAUMONT .	*Miss Violet Kemble Cooper*
PRINCE CHARLES .	*Mr. Henry Daniell*
PHEDRO . . .	*Mr. Herbert Grimwood*

A Chancellor, Courtiers, Ladies-in-Waiting, Lackeys, Maids

THE MOUNTEBANKS

URSUS—A Philosopher	. *Mr. E. Lyall Swete*
DEA—A Blind Dancer	. *Miss Jane Cooper*
ANOTHER DANCER .	*Miss Olga Barowski*
GWYMPLANE—A Clown	*Mr. John Barrymore*

Drummer Boys, a Sailor

CLAIR DE LUNE

NOTE—Suggestions for the play, also the names of mountebanks and villain, are taken from *L'Homme qui Rit*, by Victor Hugo.

ACT I

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SCENE I

[An old park with avenues of trees leading away in all directions. Directly in background of stage there is a sheet of water fringed by willow and poplar trees. On the right and left is a high box hedge formed in curves with the top clipped in grotesque shapes mostly of birds. A statue is placed in the centre of each hedge, and beneath the statues are seats.

When the curtain rises several courtiers are discovered wandering or sitting about. There is much laughing and whispering behind fans.]

2D COURTIER

What an extraordinary evening! How calm the water is! It makes the swans look exactly like topaz clouds reflecting in a titanic mirror.

A LADY

Yes. The sky is just as clear as the Queen's ear-rings of aquamarine. A storm could hardly blow up out of such blueness, so the masque is bound to be heavenly.

3D COURTIER [*approaching*]

I hate to interrupt your celestial jargon with human speech, but does anybody know whether Phedro has been able to find the Prince and give him the Queen's command?

LADY [*answering with frigid distinction*]

Probably not, but the Prince can never be found and is always forgiven. It is much to be loved in secret by a——

1ST COURTIER [*laying finger on his lips*]

Hush!

2D COURTIER [*reprovingly*]

At court one must try not to think aloud or one is perhaps overheard by—[*makes the motion of a blade across his throat*].

2D LADY

O nonsense! Why, Phedro confides in everybody, and so nobody ever believes him. Yet he is always quite right.

2D COURTIER

He puts his nose into the dust that is swept out of great corners. Indeed he looks in unthinkable places, and finds the incredible.

1ST COURTIER

Do you know what he told me lately?

LADY

I am ailing with curiosity.

1ST COURTIER

It was a fantastic tale about one of our own lot. Indeed about one wearing strawberry leaves and with two very young sons growing up, and she, apparently imagining the younger to be the living likeness, growing plainer every day, of a former indiscretion, gives directions to her favourite lackey to get rid of this wrong one and he, from spleen, gives the honest child away. The lady dies shortly after; the father never suspects anything. The bastard inherits, so the entire tragedy was in vain.

3D COURTIER

Fear is always absurd. You should be quite sure you are found out first; even then you have only to look rather sharply at any-

one you fear in order to reduce *Him*. Indeed, the best of defences is presumption upon the brotherhood of sin.

A LADY

O how true!

PHEDRO

[*A person of shifty, wizened visage enters. In a jocular tone.*]

What is "O how true?" [*He glances about him.*] You are all looking very *en rapport* with the Almighty. In fact as if He had been telling you secrets. Did they concern me? I am always a prey to the desire of hearing what is said—just before and just after I am in a room.

1ST COURTIER

[*With much pomposity hiding his embarrassment.*]

We were commanded to be in attendance on the Queen. Could you find Prince Charles? You were sent to find him, were you not?

PHEDRO [*nodding to the right*]

I have achieved my significant purpose. The Prince is playing at croquet with the

Duchess, and says when the Queen arrives to let him know.

1ST COURTIER

He is very casual. How very indiscreet of him!—to show so plainly his passion for the Duchess.

PHEDRO

Oh no! Mountains cannot knock one another down. They can only be blown up, from underneath [*smiles enigmatically*].

1ST COURTIER

You are difficult to follow.

PHEDRO

My lord, I am speaking in metaphor. It is a dodge I learned from the poets.

3D COURTIER

I repeat, you are difficult and poetry is impossible to follow. However, poetry is no longer the fashion.

[*Takes a pinch of snuff, and looks with agreeable enmity at* 2D COURTIER.]

PHEDRO [*deprecatingly*]

I merely try to match my words against your silks and laces, my lord. But—her Majesty is approaching.

[*Enter the* QUEEN, *a sharp-featured, neurotic-looking woman. One of her Cabinet is speaking earnestly to her and she is paying him scant attention.*]

MINISTER

It is vitally necessary that we should discover upon what terms they would capitulate.

QUEEN

Yes, and they must be heavily taxed for holding out so long. Imagine other people presuming to be patriotic. It simply draws everything out to such an absurd length. Ah, how irritable it makes me to think. Phedro, where is the Prince, where is Prince Charles?

[*During the last of her speech she withdraws her arm from the Minister's, who, seeing there is no further hope of holding her attention, withdraws respectfully and quite unobserved.*]

PHEDRO

Attending impatiently the arrival of your Majesty upon the other side of the copse. I go to make him aware of your presence.

[*He bows himself out, and the* QUEEN *looking anxiously in the direction of the vanishing* PHEDRO *espies* PRINCE CHARLES *and the* DUCHESS *upon a lawn.*]

QUEEN [*adjusting her lorgnette*]

How silly people look playing croquet. The Duchess appears to me exactly like a bent hairpin.

2D COURTIER

[*Looking also in the direction of the* DUCHESS *and half admiringly.*]

Indeed, Madame, her Grace is too tall to look well bending down.

QUEEN [*turning upon him*]

I hope you are not hiding a mud-sling in your silk swallow-tail. Perhaps you forget a courtier's principal duty should be the culture of tact, and tact is nothing whatever but helping me exaggerate my humours until I tire of them.

2D COURTIER

Indeed, indeed, Madame, your Majesty's brilliance blinds my eyes with humility.

[*Enter* PRINCE CHARLES, *a slender, exotic-looking gentleman.*]

PRINCE

Dear Cousin, how delicious you are looking—so royal and alert. [*He bends over her hand.*] Ah! [*His vitality seems suddenly to leave him at the thought.*] I have just been trying to lessen Josephine's habitual *ennui* by making her my victim at croquet.

QUEEN

[*With a slight lounge into sentimentality.*]

I am sure she, like many others, is easily your victim—at croquet. But come, let us be alone, let us dismiss this chain of faces, they confine my thoughts. I would like to talk well, I would like to talk fantastically, that is, I wish you would think of something original for tonight's entertainment.

[*She signals to the courtiers that they may leave.*]

After all it is the prelude to your nuptials.

Let us think of something to surprise Josephine.

PRINCE

To *surprise* Josephine! But nothing could surprise Josephine.

QUEEN

You are probably mistaken. I believe any reality would surprise her. All her life she has watched life passing in a mirror. She has never touched a thing—I think she has very curious hands. But let us——

[*She perceives that some of the courtiers are still lingering about. Turns to them.*]

I have several times intimated that you may disperse.

[*Courtiers go out swiftly.*]

[*Looking at Prince wistfully.*] You can imagine that I am a little sad today. There is a mist between me and everything else, the gardens are dull, the flowers have lost their fragrance. A sirocco seems blowing up from the graves of all young people who have never been given a chance. Tell me, do you care much for Josephine?

CHARLES [*pompously*]

My Cousin, my Sovereign, this marriage has been arranged, I presume in lieu of my lost brother, the Prince of Vaucluse, and apparently in order further to quilt your Majesty's exchequer.

QUEEN [*interrupting him*]

Your poor brother; your poor brother; if it had been he, how much heartbreak I would have been spared.

PRINCE

Which means, your Majesty?

QUEEN

That I have been talking to myself, and you have been listening, which is ungallant, as if you were to let me put rouge on my nose instead of on my cheeks without stopping me.

PRINCE

[*Rather uneasily returning to a favourite subject.*]

Well, your Majesty, now I have accustomed myself so long to the idea of my marriage that it gives me pleasure and calm to dwell on it, especially when I gaze upon

Josephine's tapering regality—then I am most inclined to think your esteemed father, our former King, was wise in recommending it, and that Fate was not too unkind in disposing of my half-brother in her own mysterious way.

[*He smiles rather unpleasantly.*]

QUEEN

[*Who has not attended the last part of his speech.*]

Yes. To provide at one clip for her—the child of his love, and for me, the result of his duty, proved him a parent, a statesman, and, tonight, I am a little inclined to think, a blackguard. However, you know this marriage has none of my command in it and there are many ways out.

[PHEDRO *invisible to the* QUEEN *and the* PRINCE *slides into the shadow of a giant oak tree.*]

PRINCE

You mean if either of us——

QUEEN

That if any charge of unworthiness could be brought by either of you against the other,

then it would be my duty even at the last hour——

PRINCE [*suddenly*]

Well, unfortunately, my various dissipations have only rendered me romantic in the eyes of your court, and as for Josephine——

QUEEN

Ah, her appearance gives no clue to her mind [*with an attempted lightness*], save occasionally there is too much scent on her cambric.

PRINCE

Why do you dislike Josephine?

QUEEN

I do not dislike her, but she behaves unbecomingly. She is very arrogant. Arrogance does not become a bastard.

PRINCE [*in a teasing vein*]

You do dislike her. You hate her, even though she is your half-sister, but I find her enchanting. I adore her cold, slender finger tips and the perfection of her contemptuous profile. She moves exactly like a swan.

QUEEN [*trying to control her emotion*]

At last you are giving yourself entirely away. I am hearing what I know. Ugh! how doubly unpleasant!

PRINCE

Why should I not give myself away to you, Cousin?

QUEEN

You mean I am powerless to harm either of you.

PRINCE

Why should you wish to harm us?

QUEEN

There are many things you might not understand; for instance, there is a love that is half hatred. It is sprinkled into life in a rather strange manner—by wounds. However, I am becoming sentimental and I hate sentimentality. It reminds me of people with colds in their heads who have lost their pocket handkerchiefs.

PRINCE [*in evident uneasiness*]

Madame, your eloquence is remarkable,

but to say that you are mysterious is all that I dare to say.

QUEEN

You dare to say what you want to say [*bitterly*]. You have courage enough to satisfy your curiosities like everybody else, but I have always noticed that when people are not curious their manners become extraordinary. However, we are forgetting about the fête. Let us call Phedro.

PRINCE [*bowing*]

With pleasure.

[*He calls.* PHEDRO *emerges after a few seconds at an entirely different angle from the place where he was concealed.*]

PHEDRO

Majesty.

QUEEN

[*Addressing him in a peremptory voice.*]

It is my wish that you should think of something bizarre to be included in the festivities of tonight. The Prince and myself do not seem able to put our minds on it.

PHEDRO

I think most certainly, Majesty, there should be something bizarre about these festivities, but Majesty——

[*He makes her a low bow.*]

QUEEN [*interrogatively*]

Yes?

PHEDRO [*sliding up to her*]

Could I beg a moment alone with your Majesty? For it would be my humble view that both *fiancés* share the surprise.

QUEEN

[*Turning to the* PRINCE *with a gesture of dismissal.*]

Go along, Charles. At any rate you have a sort of sleight-of-hand manner of looking at your watch that makes me rather nervous.

PRINCE

[*Taking her hand, and becoming mischievously eloquent with relief.*]

Then, *au revoir*, my Cousin. When this garish day is drowned in the sapphire pool of night, and we are all like pallid flowers tossed

upon moody currents of mysterious desire, perhaps—who knows? our petals may touch in that tender gloom of night and music.

[*Bends tenderly, whimsically over her hand.*]

QUEEN

[*Gazing after his exit enraptured, once more hopeful, then turning to* PHEDRO.]

Ah, Phedro, what joy there is in being foolish!

PHEDRO

Pleasure has two extremes, Madame. One is to have your lover in your arms, the other is to have him in your power.

QUEEN [*pacing up and down*]

I must have one or the other. What can be done. Think for me, advise me. I am too unstrung to think for myself. When one wants a thing very much, everything blurs.

PHEDRO

There are many voices whispering all together in my mind. In a little perhaps one will be louder than the rest—then we may plan.

QUEEN

But the fête. We are continually forgetting about the fête.

PHEDRO

[*Thinking, with his finger against his lips.*]

Out of one purpose often comes another perfected.

QUEEN

You are talking in enigmas, and it is growing late. See how long and slender the poplar shadows are getting on the grass. When the wind and sun touch them they look a little like obelisks flashed over with strange writings.

PHEDRO

Your Majesty is adding the accomplishment of a poet to the genius of a sovereign.

QUEEN [*shivering*]

No, I would not like to be a poet. They are always dying of *ennui* or madness. But, Phedro, to the point.

PHEDRO [*suddenly*]

Majesty, some mountebanks arrived at the park lodge last night. They crave to play before your Majesty.

QUEEN [*coming out of a reverie*]

Are they dancers, or do they act plays?

PHEDRO

Their performance I understand is peculiar. One of them is blind, the other is deformed in some way. With them is a doctor of philosophy, one who heals the scars of flesh or heart with powders or words befitting the case.

QUEEN [*wanly*]

They do not sound original.

PHEDRO

And yet from the effect they stir there must be something. It appears the clown causes those who are incurably sad to faint with laughter.

QUEEN

It would be charming to laugh, to be unable to help laughing. Have them sent to

my porter in the northern wing and I will interview them before the masque. Ah, here comes the Duchess leaning upon her Prince's arm. I must say she looks as if there might be something more amusing to lean upon.

[*Enter* JOSEPHINE *and the* PRINCE.]

QUEEN

Well, Josephine.

DUCHESS

Well, my sister.

[*Sighs and stoops over a bed of heliotrope.*]

QUEEN

Why are you so melancholy, Josephine? You are standing in the portals of joy—I confess they do not appear very much to intrigue you.

DUCHESS

Possibly I am melancholy because I am not curious.

QUEEN [*sarcastically*]

No, rocks could hardly be curious about

the waves or the wrecks washing against them. Come, Phedro.

[*She goes.* PRINCE *bows after the* QUEEN *and then comes back to the* DUCHESS.]

PRINCE

Beauty like yours is a penance for other women to regard. You are very like an exquisite temple in which there is no god. Yet I would not put a god in your temple.

DUCHESS [*rather bored*]

No? What would you put there?

PRINCE

In the very centre of your temple I would place a faun with swift, strange limbs, crisp, serpentine hair, and the smile of a demon.

DUCHESS [*turning to him slowly*]

The smile of a demon? I think that would be enchanting. Ah, how tired I am, I think I will go and rest. What in the world is one tired from? What does one rest for——

[*She pauses in rather a lost manner.*]

PRINCE

Yes, do go and rest, for tomorrow you must be radiant as a new-blown flower in the first rays of the sun.

DUCHESS

[*Turning to him with a faint curiosity.*]

I suppose that afterwards my appearance will please you, even if my spirits are never particularly high.

PRINCE

I do not care about your spirits. I do not care about your soul. I love the pliant rippling motion of your pensive youth. I love your imperial beauty, for it throws open the last sealed chambers of my own fancy.

DUCHESS

Fancy—fancy—I have fancied so many things.

[*The sound of an approaching flute is heard together with the creaking of a carriage.*]

A strange sound, what can it be?

[*During the ensuing speeches the creaking and the flute come nearer.*]

PRINCE

Josephine, our life together will be exquisite. It will be as the lives of the Romans in Greece—a bacchanale of peculiar formalities. We will bury conscience in the poppy-haunted air of exhausting revelry. We will——

DUCHESS

O Charles, you talk exactly like those men who design my dresses, but look——

[Her eyes are riveted upon a curious cavalcade crossing from right to left of stage, first a very small house on wheels drawn by a large wolf-dog; at its side, walking, an old man, his head bent in deep thought. He wears the cap and gown of a doctor of philosophy. After him, with dark hair falling almost to the ground about her pallid face, is walking a girl of extraordinary beauty. She is looking rigidly ahead of her and is being guided by a white ribbon suspended from the back of the cart. A few paces behind her comes a sinuous, coffee-skinned slave girl with that erect majesty of one who has worn crowns or carried water pitchers through generations. Behind the slave

follows the flute player, a mountebank, horribly twisted in some manner not visible in the twilight. The PRINCE, *who has permitted the carriage to go by him in a wonderment intensified by the beauty of the blind girl, walks over to the mountebank.*]

PRINCE [*arrogantly*]

Who are you all? What are you doing here?

[*Instead of answering, the mountebank hastily puts his flute into his pocket and executes a handspring, the third taking him altogether behind the scene, while from the front of the cavalcade, comes a high, cracked voice in answer to the* PRINCE'S *question.*]

A VOICE

We are players, your Highness, mountebanks commanded for the pleasure of the Queen.

[*The* DUCHESS *has grown very white and is standing with her hand pressing her heart.*]

DUCHESS

What was that tune he played upon his

flute, and what dreadful thing was the matter with him?

PRINCE

I do not know, but as she walked by her face was beautiful. It was like a prayer coming into the presence of God.

DUCHESS [*regarding the* PRINCE *sharply*]

Really? What can be speaking in you? Surely not yourself?

[*She laughs shrilly and exits. The flute continues to play. The* PRINCE *absorbed, unheeding her departure, stands looking after the mountebanks.*]

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

[In the palace grounds at night. Lanterns are suspended everywhere from the trees. The front of the players' cart is seen protruding up-stage left. The philosopher is seated on the steps of the car smoking a pipe. The blind girl with strange, tentative footsteps and feeling hands is busy with duties around the cart.]

DEA

Think of it; we are in the park of the Queen, and these lilies and roses are brushed every day by the silken stir of her ladies-in-waiting.

URSUS

Well, I do not feel much elated at being here. An ambition gained is an ambition lost, and I am too old to have many ambitions.

DEA

It is wonderful to be in the park of the Queen—to think that the shade of these

same trees darkens her jewels at midday, and that through them is cast over her a shawl of glittering ribbons upon moonlight nights.

URSUS [*patting her shoulder and smiling*]

Joy makes poets out of all of us. [*Half to himself*] But it is only a poet who can sing in the clutches of death and pain.

DEA [*very thoughtfully*]

Yet underneath all my joy I am thinking hard tonight of the beginning of things. I wonder, I wonder is it because I am nearing the end of things.

URSUS

Dea, dearest, you are not ill tonight? You have not again those flutterings in your heart?

DEA

Not more than I can bear. How good Gwymplane has been to me! I wish I had been old enough to see him on the night he got lost, and found me in the snow on my dead mother's breast, and God led us to you.

URSUS

I do not wish to think of that night. You were like a tiny, frozen rose-petal, and he—

he was so small himself it didn't seem possible he could have carried you all the way and God——

[URSUS *covers his face with his hands and speaks in a low voice.*]

When you were both under the lamp I asked him what he found to smile at. I asked him roughly to stop smiling.

DEA [*happily*]

Yes, Gwymplane always smiles, doesn't he? He must have a very contented spirit. I wish that I could see his smile. How it provokes other people to laugh!

[URSUS *looks at her pityingly, and pats her on the shoulder.*]

I smile and weep a great deal lately over my love for Gwymplane, and I am frightened about one thing.

URSUS

What is that?

DEA

That someone is going to make him unhappy.

URSUS

Gwymplane worships you. While you are

singing and smiling I do not think anything could make him unhappy.

DEA

I hope not. You know I feel that he has given his soul into my hands and that I must take care of it as I would a little child. Yes, I feel as if Gwymplane were my child, and yet something more than my child that makes my heart bound and my song tremble into silence.

[*A nightingale sings in the distance.*]

URSUS

My Dea!

DEA

Tell me, Ursus, Gwymplane is so wonderful. He—he attracts everyone so. Does he never notice any especial person in the audience? Some one whom he attracts?

URSUS

No, Dea, and you need never worry about that. Gwymplane will never love or be beloved save by you.

DEA

Ah, how good it is to hear that! How

beautiful tonight is! I would like to sit forever like this, very near to you and talking of Gwymplane.

[*A sudden voice almost at their elbow. Enter* PHEDRO.]

PHEDRO

But everyone is talking of Gwymplane.

[URSUS *rising whispers to* DEA *to go.*]

Why do you dismiss your beautiful daughter? Her pallor, her most haunting stare, have already sown chaos in the heart of a certain important personage.

URSUS

Leave me, Dea.

[DEA *silently exits.*]

Who are you who visit us so abruptly?

PHEDRO [*whimsically*]

I think I am a cork upon very troubled waters.

URSUS

That does not answer me enough.

PHEDRO

Then I am a web binding men and women while they sleep to unexpected things.

URSUS

Ah, you are a trouble maker?

PHEDRO

No—but I discover what is unusual in the senses of one person and in the circumstances of another person—Indeed, I have had a splendid training.

URSUS

Where?

PHEDRO

I have been—but I was almost showing you the colour of the water I rose from.

URSUS

Well, I have no curiosity.

PHEDRO

That is exactly why one wishes to talk to you. Curiosity in other people always makes me terribly suspicious. I remember suddenly the reasons that can make *me* curious. Now

I can talk to you, for one feels you might not even listen, so you couldn't possibly care enough to repeat. I was a lackey once.

URSUS

A sordid position.

PHEDRO

[*Becomes slightly frenzied during his speech.*]

Yes. A servant is something to absorb the spittle of their irritability. A hand to arrange the pages of their private diary when they get stuck together with filth; and above all a presence between them and the mirror during those grey dawn hours when passing it, they are likely to see themselves as they are. Ah, then one must be armed with the eloquence of Cato to reassure these sow's ears that they are still silk purses. Otherwise the devil hás to be bought off in the morning and with three times the effort. One thing they never count on, however.

URSUS

And that?

PHEDRO

The effect on another human being of their

absurdity and the passion of malice they rouse from a too long concealed contempt.

URSUS [*looking at him curiously*]

Contempt is the armour of snakes.

PHEDRO [*his face undergoing a change*]

Is it truly, my fine gentleman? Well, my mind has been wandering and stumbled on a *cul-de-sac* as usual. Ah, the hope of being understood—it is almost extinct. However, if I cannot be understood, I shall, nevertheless, be felt.

URSUS

Well, what do you want of me? I am a philosopher and as such am not occupied with any sort of facts.

PHEDRO

I suppose not. You philosophers are blind men in dark rooms looking for the footprints of shadows, are you not?

URSUS [*smiling*]

Not at all. We philosophers have merely learned to practice humour in the presence of what is commonplace. But what is it you do want of me?

PHEDRO

What everybody wants—to talk about Gwymplane.

URSUS

Well?

PHEDRO

Have you had this gold mine with you long?

URSUS

Years and years.

PHEDRO

You bought him, I suppose, from some travelling show?

URSUS

No, he came to me of his own accord, and yet by accident.

PHEDRO

Was he riding the wind? And did it drop him by chance upon your knees?

URSUS

He came by accident. He remains of his own accord.

PHEDRO

Curious.

URSUS

What is curious?

PHEDRO

The irrelevancy of my mind.

URSUS

Of what were you thinking?

PHEDRO

Tell me, did you—did you—ever hear of the Comprachicos?

URSUS

Yes—why?

PHEDRO

Inhuman people they must have been.

URSUS

Not more so than those who gave them their practice.

PHEDRO

They have provided most of the circuses that roam around the world with freaks.

URSUS

They had a great knowledge of surgery.

PHEDRO

Yes. They had an amusing way of putting young children into a press—young children whose existence it would have been very uncomfortable to admit in certain glittering circles. This press was shaped like a bottle so that the growth became abnormal, and when the press was lifted the human form had already attained the shape of a bottle. They could also print everlastingly rather strange expressions upon the human countenance.

URSUS [*starts*]

Yes, yes, I have heard of that.

PHEDRO

However, even such people were afraid to die.

URSUS

During the death of the worst person his soul shines through for a moment.

PHEDRO [*rather uncomfortable*]

Well, well, to go back. A strange story came under my authority written by one of these Comprachicos.

URSUS

Really, how was that?

PHEDRO

You know I am an official.

URSUS

Of what sort?

PHEDRO

I am the examining magistrate of all the jetsam from the sea that is washed from anywhere whatever upon our shores.

URSUS

That is an original position!

PHEDRO

It was created for me by the Queen to whom I have rendered much service. But I was saying that a most extraordinary story happened along in a medicine bottle that had floated for years upon the sea.

URSUS

Ump!

PHEDRO

Ah—it was a long confession, and it had floated for about fifteen years in the sea.

[*He is watching* URSUS *narrowly.*]
URSUS [*starting visibly*]

PHEDRO

What were you about to say?

URSUS

When one has talked to one's self for a great many years it is hard to hold one's tongue in public.

[*Enter the* PRINCE — *debonair and haughty.* PRINCE *ignores* PHILOSOPHER *and pulls* PHEDRO *aside.*]

PRINCE

Well! What have you arranged?

PHEDRO

My lord—the desires of youth are swifter than my wits. Yet I have tried.

PRINCE

Nonsense. . . . No rhetoric. . . . What is accomplished?

PHEDRO

It will be easily managed. I have your keys.

PRINCE

Is she willing?

PHEDRO

Innocence is always obliging at such a moment.

PRINCE

Neither the Queen nor the Duchess must have an inkling of this.

PHEDRO

No, my lord.

PRINCE

Tonight and tomorrow night. . . . What contrasts! Two crimes! A secret and a public one!

PHEDRO

My lord is sardonic.

[URSUS *after looking at them for a few moments has wandered off to the cart, and is seen making preparations for the evening's performance. There is the sound of* DEA'S *singing.*]

PRINCE

Ah, how exquisite! I think I shall go and speak with her!

PHEDRO [*detaining him*]

Better not, my lord, much better not.

PRINCE [*shaking him off*]

All right, all right. Only don't insist, don't irritate me or I shall spite myself. . . . I cannot bear to take any one's advice.

PHEDRO

Nor do you, my lord. I merely reminded you of the presence of your own common sense.

PRINCE

[*A pettish grimace flashing across his countenance*]

I hope this performance may make the Duchess forget herself for a few moments. She has seemed more than ordinarily bored today.

PHEDRO [*murmuring*]

To be so matchless as her Grace is as bad as being blind. It gives one nowhere to look.

PRINCE

She is perfection outside; inside—I do not know. Where is that distorted fellow that bounded away from me in the darkness just before dinner?

PHEDRO

Oh—Gwymplane—he is probably off somewhere charming the birds awake with his flute.

PRINCE [*in reverie*]

Yes, Josephine is magnificent. Yet I think there is a strange grimace upon the face of her soul. I am longing to find out what is at the bottom of her smile. Ah, I shall be the first to bathe in her delights. It is a most invigorating thought.

[*He plucks a flower and places it in his buttonhole.*]

PHEDRO

My lord finds it enchanting to be the first?

PRINCE

It is the only enchantment. If you were a real man, you would know that, Phedro,

but if you were really a man I could not confide in you.

PHEDRO [*winces then recovers himself*]

My lord was saying——

PRINCE [*in a mood of reverie*]

That passion yearns for surprises—and love hankers after peace.

PHEDRO

And in your marriage, my lord?

PRINCE

I yearn for surprises. Of course the right sort of surprises.

PHEDRO

You will get them, my lord.

PRINCE

[*Who is not attending him but listening to Dea's song.*]

What?

PHEDRO

My sixth sense whispers to me, my lord, that you are on the eve of many surprises.

[*The noise of the wand of the* COURT

STEWARD *is heard pounding through the park.*]

AN APPROACHING VOICE

The Queen's court is arriving. The Queen's court precedes the Queen. See that the performance is ready. See that the performance is ready.

[*The voice dies away. There is the sound of much commotion in the vicinity of the cart. The voice of* DEA *ceases and someone calls:* GWYMPLANE! GWYMPLANE *answering distantly: Yes.* URSUS: *Hurry.* GWYMPLANE: *I come. The* PRINCE *and* PHEDRO *steal quickly away.*]

CURTAIN

SCENE 3

[*Courtiers entering. A lady looking through her lorgnette.*]

A LADY

I hope this is not going to be too boring.

3D COURTIER

Ah, that, Madame, is the pleasure-seeker's prayer. Save me this night from being bored to death.

2D COURTIER [*a great dandy*]

I hope they have enchanting costumes, and that they are well perfumed.

[*He smells a scrap of lace.*]

LADY

I hear he is remarkable.

2D COURTIER

Who?

LADY

The mountebank, I forget his name. He has a Latin name besides, which I forget also, but they say that when he appears. . . .

COURT USHER [*announces*]

The Queen.

[*The Queen arrives surrounded by a brilliant court.* JOSEPHINE *attends her, dressed entirely in silver and wearing immense emeralds. Her hair is very formally powdered, and she wears a cherry-coloured cloak. A coloured slave in black moiré carries her train.*]

QUEEN

I am not in a mood for laughing tonight. [*She glances at Josephine.*] At any rate it is always singularly depressing to go anywhere in order to laugh. And if this clown causes me even to smile he shall have some rare reward.

[*Seats herself upon a raised dais. Courtiers group themselves around her. Most of the ladies have seats. Many of the gentlemen sit at their feet.*]

JOSEPHINE

[*Listlessly fluttering her fan; she is on the left of the* QUEEN *and near the audience.*]

How tedious! For what are they delaying?

PRINCE [*standing over her*]

We are scarcely seated.

JOSEPHINE

Waiting is so tedious. It puts me in a bad humour, and I lose my enthusiasm.

PRINCE

Before you have quite found it, eh?

[*A gong sounds. Two stalwart men move the cart to left centre of stage; with a click the sides of the carriage are flung open and a stage about twelve feet wide and four feet above the ground appears. In the back is a green curtain, ornamented with constellations. Suddenly a grotesque figure completely hooded and masked, attended by two small drummer boys, makes its appearance. The figure squats upon the floor in direct centre of stage. The drummers seat themselves beside it and all*

three begin to play; the attendants upon their drums, the centre figure upon a flute. No human part of him can be seen, save his hands which are remarkably beautiful, sensitive and pallid. He moves them with extraordinary grace. He plays upon his flute an air from India. Suddenly upon the stage above him appears a Hindu girl. She executes a sinuous pantomimic dance of youth and desire. The figure playing upon the flute gradually turns his back to the audience and facing the dancer continues to play. Finally the dancer, noticing her admirer, commences to dance for him alone. The music becomes more breathless; the hooded figure plays a screaming tone upon his flute. Immediately a third slave, attired as a drummer, rushes out and catches his flute from the green masque, who jumps upon the stage, and seizing the dancer, savagely—gracefully, about her slim waist, dances with her, at once tenderly and primitively.]

QUEEN

What agility and strength the man has got. He has made me catch my breath already, which is far better than to laugh.

JOSEPHINE

He dances like a demon over burning altars.

PRINCE

What was that, Josephine?

JOSEPHINE

Don't distract my attention.

PRINCE [*laughing*]

Attention? Attention? Why, Josephine, I never knew that gift was among your talents!

JOSEPHINE

Sh! Sh!

[*During the dance, the Hindu girl becomes more and more enamoured of her partner, who eludes and attacks her in a perfect frenzy of grace and passion. Finally she tries to unmask him or to pull off his cloak, without success. A chime is heard. The drummers play a strange, sinister march. An old man enters—the slave owner. He sees his slave in the arms of one whom she obviously loves, and rushes at the masked figure with his sword. At this the green mask flings the girl away*

from him, tears off his mask, throws open his coat and stands revealed before the slave owner, but with his back to the audience. The man is about to let fall his sword when he looks upon what he is about to kill. Gradually his jaw drops with amazement and he lets out a terrible yell of laughter. The slave girl who has stood watching him, now creeps round to see what is causing him so much mirth, and gazing up suddenly into the face of her partner utters a shriek of horror and runs from the stage. The slave owner follows her, his sides shaking with laughter. The figure stands rigidly transfixed, his back still to the audience.]

JOSEPHINE [*leaning forward eagerly*]

What can he be like! I wish he would turn round.

PRINCE

You seem interested, Josephine. Do these wretched mummers really . . .

[*But* JOSEPHINE *is leaning forward intently for the music has begun again. This time the figure is doing a strange dance of loneliness and search for his departed partner, his mask lies upon the*

ground, but he shields himself with his cloak. Occasionally in the wildness of his dance it slips a little, permitting glimpses of parts of his face.]

QUEEN [*suddenly in a tone of fright*]

What is it the man has upon his face? Is it a great scar?

JOSEPHINE

No! No! It is his mouth that is like that.

[*Her excitement is obviously gathering to an almost unbearable point as the dance proceeds. In a low voice:*]

Oh, he is deformed, he is terribly deformed, his shoulders are not abreast of one another. Or is it some devil's head squatting upon his body of an angel.

A VOICE

No, it is his legs; they are bent in opposite directions.

A VOICE

No wonder the lady will not come back to him!

[GWYMPLANE'S *dance seems to be reaching a climax; he has nosed about the floor like a dog; he has tried to leap over the*

roof in order to discover his lost sweetheart, and now he turns facing the audience, his arms outstretched in pitiful dejection. There is an instant's deep silence, and then a great laugh rings out from the audience. The QUEEN *herself rocks to and fro, backward and forward behind her fan.* JOSEPHINE *starts forward, in her face a mixture of amusement, giving gradually way to some sinister thought which makes her gaze fixedly at the mountebank with parted lips. Her unswerving glance at length draws his eyes towards her and for one single instant their glances seem to pass through one another—the exquisite duchess, the grotesque clown. No one has seen the look, save* PHEDRO, *who wipes his lips with an expression of intense amusement. Suddenly from behind* GWYMPLANE *steps* DEA, *and he returns with an almost imperceptible start to his act. Seeing this lovely apparition, he throws himself at her feet, and she, apparently perceiving him, does not repel him but puts her slim hands in his wild hair, and they go through some tender motions to an exquisite melody upon the flute. Gradually with gestures of pity and love she invites him to go with her, and he hardly*

believing is about to be led away, when suddenly the oriental melody begins again. The dancer appears. She glances at GWYMPLANE *with the hypnotized fascination of utter horror.* DEA *attempts drawing* GWYMPLANE *away, but he resists, becoming again a victim to the old charm. The slave girl, with a wild gesture, offers herself to him. Simultaneously,* DEA *motions him with prayer to go with her. He makes some pitiful indecisive motions between them.* DEA *wrings her hands; the slave girl smiles; when, with a sudden gesture of despair,* GWYMPLANE *takes out his knife and makes a motion of cutting out his heart, then sinks upon the ground, and suddenly holds up his heart dripping with blood in his two pale hands. The slave girl tries to snatch it, but he gives it to* DEA, *who presses it against her own.* GWYMPLANE *breathes his last, and the slave, falling at the feet of* DEA, *licks the blood from the heart of her dancer off the floor.*

Miniature curtain descends to some strange music recalling the chimes of a clock.]

QUEEN

What an extraordinary pantomime! I

think these mummers act too well. They will leave a memory, and I have far too many memories already.

JOSEPHINE

[*Trying to conceal the impression the play has made on her.*]

I shall never have any memories. When the door closes I shall forget.

PRINCE

Perhaps you are not so agile as you think. Something of you may catch in the door when it slams, and go on aching forever.

QUEEN [*tolerantly*]

Inexperience can always afford to be a little ridiculous, can it not? [*rises*] Well, it has all been very entertaining. I have really immensely enjoyed myself.

[*Turning to her courtiers and taking a brooch from her lace.*]

I think we should give the clown some token of tonight's amusement. [*to a servant*] Go and tell Messire Gwymplane to attend us.

PRINCE

The performance of this mountebank has agitated me. [*passing his hand over his brow.*] I want to forget something in motion, in motion.

JOSEPHINE

[*Looking at him and at the* QUEEN, *and twinkling with a sort of spiteful mischief.*]

It will be delicious to dance tonight. The starving should dance, the replete should dream! Come! [*takes his arm*]

PRINCE

What an exquisite thing for you to say to me—just at this moment.

[QUEEN *glances at them with an expression of pain and hatred. An attendant approaches the* QUEEN, *who breaks sharply out of her reverie.*]

QUEEN

You have not brought the clown?

ATTENDANT

The owner of the van begs indulgence of your Majesty. The clown has wandered off

somewhere, as is his habit, and cannot be found.

QUEEN

How annoying! Well, the amusement I should have had in giving him this is really the only reason for such a gift.

[*Replaces her brooch and turns to an attendant.*]

Tell these mountebanks to leave the palace grounds before dawn.

ATTENDANT

Yes, your Majesty. [*bows himself out*]

JOSEPHINE

I am glad he did not appear. He would have been horrible to look at closely.

PRINCE

You are cold. Let me arrange your cloak more closely about your shoulders.

QUEEN

Wrap my dear sister by all means, Charles, but if you can—from the inside out.

[*Continues her conversation with a courtier.*]

JOSEPHINE [*in a low voice*]

How she dislikes me! But dislike is amusing when the hours are just ending that make one the slave of its temper.

PRINCE [*bending over her*]

Tomorrow, Josephine. . . . Tomorrow you will be safe forever from her rudeness. She will need us; our united fortunes will be the bank for her gambling.

JOSEPHINE

Ah! tomorrow—tomorrow!

QUEEN

Josephine, take your prince and await me in the ballroom.

JOSEPHINE [*glancing toward the cart*]

It is very pleasant here, your Majesty. The air is cool so far away from candlelight, and I have an inclination to headache.

QUEEN

Why, a moment ago you said, "Let us dance," to which you added as your own a quotation from something you had read.

JOSEPHINE

[*Who has been edging nearer the cart and looking with curiosity about her.*]

Idle people are moody, your Majesty, but if . . .

QUEEN [*sharply*]

It is my pleasure that you should await me in the ballroom.

JOSEPHINE

Your Majesty. . . .

[*Bowing low and taking the arm of the* PRINCE, *looks up archly into his eyes.*]

We will ask the musicians to play one of those new waltzes, that make me close my eyes quite up with delight.

[PRINCE *gazing enraptured, leads her out.*]

QUEEN

[*Furiously, turning to* PHEDRO *who has flitted in and out since the cessation of the performance, in a low voice.*]

I would speak to you. [*to courtiers*] You are at liberty to precede me to the ballroom.

[*Courtiers go out.*]

QUEEN [*leaning against a balcony*]

Ah, Phedro!

PHEDRO [*answering her tone*]

My Majesty, my sovereign star.

QUEEN

It is growing late and still nothing has been done. I cannot see that there is anything to do. Oh what discomfort!

PHEDRO

Your Majesty's eyes are too full of pain to see clearly perhaps.

QUEEN

I am obsessed by a dream, and in this dream my whole life lies snared and gasping.

[DEA *appears in the background of the cart, arranging things for the night.* PHEDRO *glances at her quickly and then back at the* QUEEN.]

PHEDRO

There is a loose stone in every wall if one scratches long enough, yet in taking one's desire there may be surprises, unpleasant surprises.

QUEEN

But if ever one clutches the echo of one's own heart, what difference if a pox of madness seize the whole world?

PHEDRO

If you are willing to mean always what you feel now, your Majesty.

QUEEN

Don't talk absurdly, Phedro. Always is never more than now. And now is ever a part of eternity. Ah, I will make you more than you would dare ask if there is something to be done and you do it. Only I would rather not know the means. I would rather not be mixed up in the brew or it might sicken me afterwards to drink—of the Spring of Life.

PHEDRO

May I beg for the reason of my scheme to be left by your Majesty for a little?

QUEEN

Yes, yes, I go, Phedro. Oh, I would not have this if I thought it would deprive him of anything he really wanted, but he is ephemeral, aesthetic—in fact, he is a poet

and doesn't really care for people. It is only for what they can make him feel that he likes them. Ah, how fascinating it is in him to be like that!

[PHEDRO *bows over her hand, and she goes out. Sound of* DEA'S *singing comes very near the stage.* PHEDRO *hides behind some tall shrubbery.* DEA *steps out, tenderly sniffing the air.*]

DEA

At last the Queen is gone; the night is mine. What a fragrance, what an exciting fragrance! It is as if all the rose petals in the world were fighting in the air!

PHEDRO [*stepping out, masked*]

Fighting in the air and in the dark, but that is human destiny, my dear young lady.

DEA [*starting*]

Who are you?

PHEDRO

A deep and disinterested friend of yours.

DEA

It is late. . . . I must be . . . [*attempts to leave*]

PHEDRO

Tell me . . . whom would you like to help most in the world?

DEA [*gaily and innocently*]

Him whom I love most in the world.

PHEDRO

Ah, that is Gwymplane.

DEA

How did you guess?

PHEDRO

You are too innocent to understand the keeping of secrets, but if you wish to render Gwymplane a service . . .

DEA

I should like to more than to live . . .

PHEDRO

Well, take this letter in your hands tonight . . . to where I shall lead you, and give it to whom I shall appoint to receive it.

DEA

But explain . . .

PHEDRO

There is little I may tell you, and much that you will have to believe. I know of Gwymplane unknown facts that would make him respected and rich to the end of his days, and of course you would not wish him always to remain a clown.

DEA

I love him too much to detain him in the little area of my wishes. Yet why should *I* carry this note?

PHEDRO

Because it must reach her Majesty by you before dawn.

DEA

Her Majesty? Shall I approach her Majesty?

PHEDRO

You will observe many distinguished persons tonight, and at close range.

DEA

What shall I say?

PHEDRO

That you know, that you carry proof that

Gwymplane is fully entitled to all the immediate riches and respect this letter begs for him.

DEA

Oh, it will be wonderful to tell the Queen that Gwymplane is entitled to immediate riches and respect. How happy he shall be made at my hands!

PHEDRO [*half aside*]

Just so much chance have any of us got at the hands of those who love us.

[*Sound of a flute is heard.*]

DEA

Gwymplane is coming!

PHEDRO [*walking swiftly to* DEA]

Mind what I tell you. Walk, feel your way down this long avenue of cypress to your right, and stop at the first white marble door you touch upon your left. Wait there for me. When I come I shall imitate the call of a cuckoo in order that the attendants may open to us immediately.

[DEA *goes out hurriedly.* GWYMPLANE *saunters in with his strange, twisted walk.*]

PHEDRO

You roam late in solitude among the damp grasses. Does that not make you too melancholy for jests?

GWYMPLANE

My ability to jest was affixed upon me by the gods in one of their humorous moments; however, anything may be written in the parchment under the seal.

[*He attempts to pass on.*]

PHEDRO [*intently regarding him*]

You are a curious fellow.

GWYMPLANE

I think it is you who are curious, sir.

PHEDRO

Ah, that was spoken after the manner of your class.

GWYMPLANE

My class. of mountebanks, you mean?

PHEDRO

No, my meaning is gathering slowly. After

all, rain does not pour from the clouds until there has been sufficient mist.

[GWYMPLANE *looks at him intently, then once more attempts departure.*]

PHEDRO

One moment.

GWYMPLANE

I beg you, sir, to let me pass. I am a prey tonight to reveries that make of me a dull companion.

PHEDRO [*experimentally*]

A lady of the court was enraptured by your performance, a lady who for many years has been aware of nothing but herself.

GWYMPLANE [*starting almost imperceptibly*]

I am glad if my performance pleased

PHEDRO

It did much more.

GWYMPLANE

In the measure of amusement I may have caused I am not interested.

PHEDRO

Nevertheless, it seemed to me that you were a little burned by the flame you cast out.

GWYMPLANE

Ah, I see that you enjoy pursuing other people's business; consequently you free me from the necessity of listening to you.

PHEDRO [*assuming anger*]

Come now, don't offend me. After all I am the steward of the Queen's court. It was I who obtained your licence to act in the palace grounds, and so apparently gratify a long-felt ambition of your lovely fellow artiste.

GWYMPLANE [*softened*]

Ah—Dea, yes. She has always dreamed of playing in the palace park. No, I do not wish to be rude to you, but I beg of you to cease your gossip. My task was harder tonight than usual. I am perhaps overtired.

[*He puts a hand to his head.*]

PHEDRO

Come, are you not a man? Is not the admiration of——

GWYMPLANE

Do not talk to me of these things. Do not talk of these things, I beg of you. [*with a suggestion of sob in his voice*] I am not like other men.

[*Unnoticed an equerry enters, and stands at* PHEDRO'S *side with a large, scented and sealed envelope.*]

EQUERRY

Your pardon, sirs.

PHEDRO

[*Going swiftly over to the equerry, and in a low aside.*]

For whom is your letter?

EQUERRY [*in a whisper*]

For one Messire Gwymplane.

PHEDRO [*attempts to take the letter*]

I will see he gets it and reads it.

EQUERRY

Who are you?

[PHEDRO *pulls up his mask.*]

O, Messire Phedro.

[*He bows low and hands him the note.*]

PHEDRO [*in a grand voice*]

You may leave. I will deliver your note. [*then in a low voice for the equerry alone*] Wait behind the hedge and I will give you an answer.

[*Exit equerry.* GWYMPLANE *starts to depart.* PHEDRO *puts his arm on his, detaining him, while he opens the letter and reads it. A smile of malicious joy crosses his countenance which he quickly cloaks with a look of alarm. He speaks aside:*]

How strange this is! Strange as if a precious bird long waited for in the night were to suddenly fly down and peck at my very gun. However . . .

[*He returns to himself with a start, walks over to the hedge where the equerry is waiting for the reply.*]

Say to her Grace that she is understood, and shall be almost instantly obeyed. [*He turns to* GWYMPLANE.]

GWYMPLANE

I beg of you, sir, permit me to depart.

PHEDRO

There is trouble abroad and it concerns you.

GWYMPLANE

Me?

PHEDRO

Still there is probably much time.

GWYMPLANE

Explain.

PHEDRO

What do you call the blind girl?

GWYMPLANE

Dea. It is not anything about Dea? There was not anything about Dea in that letter, was there?

PHEDRO

It was all about her.

GWYMPLANE

How?

PHEDRO

Listen. Instead of attending to this myself, as I have done in hundreds of similar cases, I am going to take you into my confidence.

GWYMPLANE

What is it? What is it?

PHEDRO

Your lovely fellow artiste is gone.

GWYMPLANE [*crying out*]

Gone? My Dea! That is impossible. She does not wish to go anywhere that I am not.

PHEDRO

Perhaps her wishes remained unconsulted. She may have been abducted.

GWYMPLANE [*drawing back*]

What are you saying? It is so monstrous I must laugh or scream if I go on listening to you. [*shakes* PHEDRO *by the arm*] Come out with it. Where has she gone? But she is in bed! Where else?

[*He runs back to the cart, and is heard calling frantically. The voice of* URSUS *answers him.* PHEDRO *stands listening, an evil smile contorting his mouth.*]

GWYMPLANE [*off stage*]

Dea!

[*There is no answer.*]

GWYMPLANE

[*Re-entering hurriedly. Goes up to* PHEDRO *in a threatening manner.*]

I do not understand. There is something moving around me that is foul and stealthy. Tell me what it is or I'll make you feel as if you were falling down an abyss of knives.

PHEDRO

Calm, my gentle talker. To consider alternatives, one must keep one's presence of mind.

GWYMPLANE

I know. I can imagine what these courts are like and I'll usher you into hell at once if you are trying to spatter any foul scheme upon what I love.

PHEDRO

Ah, Dea is yours?

GWYMPLANE

No, you squinting rodent. She is mine only as the light is mine, and she belongs to my soul as my prayers do.

PHEDRO

Be calm. You have misconstrued me and

are wasting time hurling invectives at some unclean figure in your own fancy.

GWYMPLANE

Well, then, speak out quickly.

PHEDRO

The Prince has fallen desperately in love with her. He confided in me so much. The letter I received informed me that he had prevailed upon her in some manner to go with him and that I was to meet him in the palace at the stroke of the quarter to render him some service.

GWYMPLANE

I cannot believe it; let me see the letter.

PHEDRO

[*Searching his pockets and vest for the letter.*]

Gracious, I must have torn it up in my nervousness. Ah yes, there it is.

[*He points to some pieces of torn paper lying at his feet in the darkness.*]

GWYMPLANE [*knocking his fists to his forehead.*]

You mean this letter came from him who is to marry the Duchess tomorrow? He who looks like the Athenian Victory. [*glancing at his own distorted limbs*] But Dea cannot see this. [*and in a voice almost of triumph*] And she cannot see him! He must have stolen her.

PHEDRO [*acidly*]

His eloquence would steal the pollen out of a flower.

GWYMPLANE

Ah Dea! But after all—he may have *told* her.

PHEDRO

What?

[GWYMPLANE *with a strange sad gesture*]

How I am.

PHEDRO

She has never known?

GWYMPLANE

Why should she? [*half to himself*] It was sweet that she should love what I am—not what I appear.

PHEDRO

Perhaps he has told her, and her hands have travelled over his face and found that it is very fair.

[GWYMPLANE *bends his head between his arms.*]

But maybe she has gone against her will.

GWYMPLANE

Yes, that is it. I must find out—O, God, take me to where I can find out.

PHEDRO

Wait for me here a moment and I will prepare for your entrance into the palace. It may be very difficult to effect an entrance.

[*He goes out and a few seconds after there is a sound of a cuckoo calling, followed by the noise of a slammed door.* GWYMPLANE *walks up and down in distraction.*]

URSUS [*from the cart*]

Gwymplane! Gwymplane! Is there anything the matter?

GWYMPLANE

I am nervous and restless. I have never been so restless.

URSUS

Well, walk far into the night, my son, until the iron clamping your brain with wakefulness melts, fades into that dew of restfulness falling upon all things before the dawn.

PHEDRO [*returning abruptly*]

Are you ready?

GWYMPLANE

I am dying of readiness.

[*They go out.*]

CURTAIN

ACT II

ACT II

Scene i

[*In the bedroom of the* Duchess—*exquisite, fantastic, with walls panelled in odd peacock blue. Upon these walls are crystal appliqués of a bizarre design, looking like strange ear-rings and holding within them amber lights. In the centre of the room falls a crystal candelabra with five small slender scarlet candles. On stage right a slender bed made entirely of the body of a swan—a canopy over it of pale rose net is attached with three blue feathers to the ceiling. This canopy drops over the head and foot of the bed. On stage left is a dressing mirror and table draped in fresh white muslin and rare lace. Below this table is a door—another door is directly opposite and behind the bed which faces the audience. In direct centre is a tall oblong window draped with a daffodil yellow taffeta faintly striped in mauve. A little in front, beneath this*

window, is a directoire sofa covered with pillows of exquisite brocade. The chairs and other appointments of furniture are cream-colored, bespattered with flowers and reminiscent of Venice. On the right, just off centre a marble faun with grotesque features on a black onyx pedestal. The DUCHESS *has set around its throat many of her priceless necklaces.*

A maid is seen preparing for the DUCHESS *when the curtain rises.*

Enter the DUCHESS *after a few seconds' interval.*]

DUCHESS

How is it possible that he is not returned? How long has he been gone? Did you notice what o'clock it was when I sent him? Answer me, answer me something. Don't stand about bemused as if you had never heard of a clock, or Piccolo, or a letter since you were born.

MAID

He cannot have had your note beyond a few minutes, Madame, but I think——

[*She bends in an attitude of listening. The* DUCHESS *is before her in opening the door on right.*]

[PICCOLO, *the same equerry seen before, enters bowing low.*]

PICCOLO

Your Grace.

DUCHESS [*with unconcealed impatience*]

Did you find the clown?

PICCOLO

Yes, your Grace.

[*He is obviously disturbed.*]

DUCHESS

Could he read my letter? Did he appear to be reading it? [*She walks swiftly up and down*] Maybe he cannot read.

PICCOLO

He did not receive the letter from me, your Grace.

DUCHESS

How do you mean?

PICCOLO

I think it was he who was standing with Messire Phedro, who took it from me to give it to him.

DUCHESS

You tasselled ass, why did you let him have it?

PICCOLO [*trying to save himself*]

Nay, your Grace, he gave it at once to the clown, for I know it was the clown standing with him by the spidery confusion of his limbs. Messire Phedro said I was to tell your Grace that you were understood and would be obeyed.

DUCHESS [*half to herself*]

Well, maybe there is some reason. [*she turns to the equerry*] Go about your business. Don't stand around as if you were expecting the lash or you will feel it.

[*The equerry rapidly retires. The* DUCHESS *turns to her maid.*]

DUCHESS

Ugh! Rid me of all this glittering discomfort.

[*The maid helps her out of the stiff wonderful dress and into a lovely azure garment sprayed with silver flowers.*]

DUCHESS

[*Fixing the maid with a peremptory eye.*]

I will only consent to be disturbed by one person tonight. He will come alone or with Messire Phedro. He will be stooped, a little below the medium height, and will probably be in black. If the Prince command me I am already at rest. If the Queen command me I am ill. Do you understand that I will be at home to no one save this one visitor?

MAID

Your Grace is obeyed.

[*The* DUCHESS *walks over to the window and throws it wide open. Moonlight falls strongly in the garden just outside and water splashes noisily from the plump hands of a dancing Cupid, poised airily upon a minute Doric column. The* DUCHESS *turns, frowning impatiently as she watches the maid's motions about the room.*]

DUCHESS

Go, go. How can you take so long to straighten a pair of slippers.

[*The maid retires precipitately. The*

DUCHESS *turns once more towards the window, glancing across the court.*]

There are shadows in Charles's room, wrangling shadows.

[*She puts her finger to her lip, biting it in a meditative manner.*]

Ah, somebody is trying to break away. What a bore it would be——

[*There is a sound of a key clicking in the latch; the door on stage left opens.* PHEDRO *comes swiftly into the room. He checks an exclamation of the* DUCHESS, *speaking hurriedly.*]

PHEDRO

I know, I guessed. Listen, Gwymplane has not had your letter. This was the only possible way. I have told him his blind girl is in the palace, in order to draw him hither. Play to that, first.

[*The* DUCHESS *hastily slips on a mask.*]

GWYMPLANE [*entering*]

Where are we now?

DUCHESS [*coming forward graciously*]

I believe you seek—

GWYMPLANE [*hastily*]

The blind girl in my troupe. It appears she is in the palace.

DUCHESS

[*Trying to conceal her joy at his arrival.*]

The palace is so amazingly large. Have you an idea in what part of the palace to look?

GWYMPLANE [*bitterly*]

Some slight idea.

DUCHESS

Then you cannot do better than to send Phedro to the exact spot.

GWYMPLANE

Very well. We both will——

[*He makes a motion of departure.*]

DUCHESS

No, no. [*detaining him with her white arm*] Let him go and discover where she is and if he cannot bring her here, then he shall return and take you to her.

GWYMPLANE

But that will lose time, I must——

DUCHESS

Mistakes are so much more disastrous than delay. One can pass unnoticed where two will be remarked. Trust to my better knowledge of the court.

GWYMPLANE [*reluctantly*]

Very well, Madame. Only speed, Sir, speed, and return to me.

PHEDRO

I will, dear mummer.

[*He exits.*]

DUCHESS

[*Turning to* GWYMPLANE *with gracious triteness.*]

Ah, what an unexpected delight that I might tell you what pleasure your performance gave.

GWYMPLANE [*standing stiffly attentive*]

Then my work is lavishly rewarded, Madame.

DUCHESS

[*In the tone of one who confers by asking a favor.*]

Do unmask. It is so very warm in these rooms.

GWYMPLANE

I consider but your comfort, Madame, in wearing my mask.

DUCHESS [*smiling subtly*]

Nay, you would be surprised at what considers my comfort and what does not. Your mask, for instance, does not.

[*She sinks upon her chaise longue, intensely graceful and beautiful.* GWYMPLANE *lets his eyes rest upon her for a moment.*]

Your mask, do remove it. I have always heard artists were most gallant to women. See, I remove mine.

GWYMPLANE

[*Stifled with surprise and emotion.*]

Madame . . . Madame. . . .

DUCHESS

Come! I command you to obey me. Pray take off your mask! You can have no idea how I hate mentioning a desire twice.

[GWYMPLANE *removes his mask. The* DUCHESS *looks at him intently and sighs.*]

DUCHESS

It must be wonderful to be you.

[*She motions him to a black cushion with golden tassels at the foot of her couch.*]

GWYMPLANE

[*Who has by this time mastered himself.*]

To be me, Madame? [*bitterly*] But of course your life is a revel of laughter; so why should not your thoughts be forever jesting through your words?

DUCHESS

I am not jesting.

GWYMPLANE [*surprised*]

Madame?

DUCHESS

It must be wonderful to be you and wind

through forests and across hills into new cities with your drummers beating attention for you, through lines of unknown faces, faces over whom you have a rare—a great power. For you can moisten them with tears—choke away their breath with laughter. And afterwards, when you have finished your performance and are walking on the outskirts of some alien city, tell me, do not certain ones steal out to you and tell you of the blasphemous fancies you have stirred awake in their souls?

GWYMPLANE

What are you saying, Madame, what are you not saying!

DUCHESS

[*Leaning forward and taking one of his beautiful hands.*]

O, Gwymplane, I am lonely. You can have no idea how lonely. Everything around me is so false to my desires, is so alien to what I feel myself to be.

GWYMPLANE

You are so beautiful, Madame. Your loneliness only makes you more so. It lends

the quality of a goddess to what is already earthly majesty.

[*He is about to press his strange lips to her hands, when suddenly he remembers and resists.*]

DUCHESS

Ah, you were going to kiss my hand. Why didn't you kiss it? [*She stretches it out close to his mouth.*] See—here—here it is, most soft and white.

[GWYMPLANE *draws away, passing his hand across his brow. The* DUCHESS *leans toward him, almost over him.*]

I am very lonely, Gwymplane. Give me a few moments of forgetfulness. O, tell me about your life—tell me about what has happened to you.

[*She lays her hand upon his shoulder.* GWYMPLANE *takes it, kisses it, and looks up at her with flaming eyes and chalk-pale face.*]

Ah, that is nice! The touch of your lips chills, burns me with forgetfulness. The touch of your lips is like a tide hushing, sucking my wakefulness down into depths of terrible oblivion. O, listen, you are grotesque

—your limbs are like the coils of nightmare. I love you because you are so grotesque—because upon your face is stamped the contorted beauty of your mind—your mind that is surely as amazing as your face. O, Gwymplane, tell me of what you have thought, tell me of what you are thinking.

GWYMPLANE

[*Who is led into rapture by her words, kneels and suddenly kisses her feet.*]

I am kissing your little white feet. It is like brushing my face amongst sprays of silken flowers.

DUCHESS

Ah, do not talk beautifully to me, Gwymplane.

GWYMPLANE

But you are beauty! What other language would you understand?

DUCHESS

Do not talk to me beautifully, Gwymplane. Talk to me with the savage pulsating words of your clown language. Talk to me as if you held a whip in your hand. [*She catches*

at his hand] What marvellous hands you have! Deceitful hands—for they look unlike the things they do—the things they must do.

GWYMPLANE

[*Sitting upon her couch and bending over her lips.*]

I think you are something I have stolen out of a temple—a wonderful wingèd crownèd figure that I have stolen out of a temple and profaned. I feel as if we were in a black barge upon a scarlet sea, as if in a moment it would dip over the horizon line and we should be lost forever together. O, I feel as if all the light in the world were flowing from behind the chalice of your pale face. I love you, I love you.

DUCHESS

[*Drawing away from his straining arms and lips.*]

You love me, you love me! But you do not talk to me as if you were a clown. You do not speak to me with those curiously pungent words that are flung between men and women in the thickets near the booths. [*almost pettishly*] You do not talk at all like a clown, Gwymplane.

GWYMPLANE

[*His eyes slowly travelling over her body.*]

I do not understand—I cannot understand why you permit my hands to touch you. Does not the flame from my hands burn you as they tremble and hover nearer, nearer to your scorching loveliness? But I think you are ivory, ivory dyed in hues of dawn and sunset.

DUCHESS

Ah, I wish you would not speak to me beautifully. I tell you beauty is not so dear to me as ugliness. O, Gwymplane [*with a rather coarse gesture nudging his arm*], O, Gwymplane, tell me of love as I want to hear of it, and I will love you better than all the rest!

GWYMPLANE

The rest? [*he presses his hand to his temple*] There are no rest. There was one—O God! I am lost! Nothing matters now [*in a shrill voice*]. I—I have found out what I can be!

DUCHESS

[*Stretching herself and smiling upon him.*]

How happy I am with you, my distorted

lover! Only I wish you had not taken the white paint from your face. I wish your lips were fantastically scarlet as when you danced. I wish you were in your clown's dress and that the circus dwarfs could be here, playing their evil music while we talked. Kiss me.

GWYMPLANE

[*Drawing away and gazing at her in rapture.*]

But my heart is here, underneath your slender foot. O, my heart has no will of its own but is only a reckless fever leaping, shivering after crumbs of your favour.

[*He is about to kiss her, when suddenly the* DUCHESS *turns aside—an odd numbness creeping over her features.*]

DUCHESS

Something is wrong—terribly wrong. You do not speak to me like a clown. You are not like a clown. Who are you—what are you really?

GWYMPLANE

My love [*he turns to kiss her shoulder*], I

am your lover. What does any other reality matter tonight?

[*There is a knock at the door on stage left.* GWYMPLANE *starts to his feet, flinging upon the* DUCHESS *a look of terror.*]

DUCHESS [*biting her lip—calls out*]

Who dares to disturb my rest?

VOICE OF PRINCE CHARLES

It is I.

DUCHESS

Well?

CHARLES

Phedro told me he thought he heard you cry out a moment ago?

DUCHESS

Ah, so it is he—[*her face has grown dark and furious*] or does he push in some accident to favour me.

GWYMPLANE [*in a low voice*]

Treachery—if I had not been so mad all evening I could have smelt it on every gust of air.

JOSEPHINE

Hush, don't ruin us.

CHARLES

Did I hear you speak?

JOSEPHINE

No, Charles. I was merely muttering a few imprecations at you for disturbing my rest.

CHARLES

You want for nothing?

JOSEPHINE

For nothing save to be left in peace.

[*The footsteps of the* PRINCE *are heard receding. Suddenly through the open French window steps* DEA. GWYMPLANE *shudders back with horror. The* DUCHESS *looks in amazement and anger at the lovely apparition.* GWYMPLANE *with a gesture of supplication implores her to be silent. The* DUCHESS *returns his look contemptuously.*]

DEA [*advancing into the room*]

Where am I? Someone took me out of one room and pushed me in here.

DUCHESS

I am the Duchess of Beaumont. You are in my room.

DEA

O, I am glad, Madame. I have been terribly frightened all evening.

[GWYMPLANE *stands frozenly against the wall.*]

DUCHESS

Really? By what?

DEA

I was looking for the Queen. I was being guided to the Queen's apartment when suddenly I found myself in a room with some gentleman.

DUCHESS

Ah, what gentleman, I wonder?

DEA

I do not know. I am blind and he would not answer me. But I felt his hand to see if it was the Court Steward's. It was not the Court Steward's hand, for this man wore a ring with a gigantic stone.

DUCHESS

[*Always unquestionably upon the right scent of anything damaging to her vanity.*]

An oblong stone?

DEA [*pausing*]

Yes, your Grace, I am sure it was an oblong stone.

DUCHESS [*her face becoming very malicious*]

Well, what did he wish of you?

DEA

He said many things to me. He told me how I appeared to him in all things beautiful, and that he wished to steal me away forever from the troop and for himself because he loved me.

DUCHESS [*starts*]

[GWYMPLANE *wrings his hands in impotent fury.*]

Strange those bundles we possess, that are of no value to us whatever, should, nevertheless, when they fall into the river, become precious as gold. [*she snaps her fingers*] So much for faithfulness! And you answered this gentleman?

DEA [*looking around abstracted*]

Your Grace, is there anyone else in this room?

DUCHESS

I don't think so.

[GWYMPLANE *starts imperceptibly. The malicious* DUCHESS, *reading his thought, shuts the window and locks it.* GWYMPLANE *looks at her in terror.*]

And what did you reply to your preposterous lover, little gipsy thief?

DEA

Madame!

DUCHESS

Unconscious, charming thief of affection that should tonight, if ever, have been faithful! So [*half to herself*] one can be jealous of a man without caring a rap for him! Well, it is something to have found out that vanity is the ruling passion. I shall take more care of its feelings than ever after this. But—your story, little blind girl.

DEA

O—I stretched my arms out against this gentleman and prayed, and my prayer was

heard, for Phedro came and said he thought he had heard you call, and this man went out telling me to remain, when a pair of hands suddenly laid hold upon my wrists and led me out into the air, then pushed me into this room.

DUCHESS

Think how disappointed your lover will be when he returns and finds you gone!

DEA

I do not care what he should think.

DUCHESS

Your affections are already a wreath upon some mortal head, eh?

DEA [*modestly*]

Yes, I love, I am beloved.

DUCHESS [*quizzically regarding her*]

By whom, pray?

DEA

Messire Gwymplane of the circus troop.

DUCHESS [*throwing back her head and laughing*]

No? Beloved by Gwymplane, you say?

[GWYMPLANE *looks at her in a horror of bewilderment, the point of her conduct beginning to pierce his heart.*]

DEA

O yes, beloved by Gwymplane.

DUCHESS

It seems to me, child, that upon this somewhat fantastic night we have perhaps changed partners.

DEA

Madame?

[GWYMPLANE *stands rigidly silent. The* DUCHESS *plucks a flower from a vase, throwing the petals over* DEA'S *head in a gesture half gay, half brutal.*]

DUCHESS

At last the whimsy of my soul is outmatched by the turn of events.

DEA

I hang upon your words, Madame, yet I do not understand them.

DUCHESS

Still you and I have proven to each other, with and without intent, the existence of a quality common to the world at large—faithlessness, look you.

[*With an almost violent gesture she drags* DEA *over to* GWYMPLANE *and places her hand upon the familiar form.*]

DEA

[*Feeling with gradually hurrying, hysterical fingers.*]

Gwymplane, my love!

GWYMPLANE

Ah, Dea, yes.

DEA

How wonderful to find you in this terrible nightmare—like a fire flaming up before snow-lost feet.

GWYMPLANE

My Dea.

[*She puts her hand upon his shoulder, the* DUCHESS *regarding them through her lorgnette.*]

DUCHESS

What an idyl! How it refreshes me to watch. However, come, clown, take the girl and begone. Here is a crown for your love—it did not please me, you know, so you are getting far more than your deserts.

DEA [*halting*]

Your love, Gwymplane? She said your love?

GWYMPLANE

Anyone can misuse a word, but my voice is lost in a stammer of shame.

DEA

I do not understand, but for what is love save to pass understanding? [*She puts her arm through his*] Come, let us go.

DUCHESS [*with furious malice*]

What a charming way of conducting life, little blind girl! When your lover is tired of pursuing his latest fancy and has been thrown out [*almost stamping her foot*] he will return and grow warm in the rays of your faith

DEA

Gwymplane will not fancy anyone save me.

Ursus says so, and besides I know it—I could not live if I did not know it.

DUCHESS [*laughing*]

[GWYMPLANE *steps menacingly towards her.*]

Clown, clown, you shall not murder me because I do not champion your deceits. [*to* DEA] Your lover does not care that I should repeat the poetry of his conversation to me this evening, but it was such rare poetry—more rare than I wanted in fact. [*mimicking derisively*] "I feel as if we were in a black barge upon a scarlet sea, as if in a moment our boat would dip over the horizon line, and we two should be lost forever," or—here is another pretty line—"I feel as if all the rays of light in the world were flowing from behind the chalice of your pale face."

DEA [*putting her hand to her heart*]

Oh, Gwymplane—the last thing she said—was so like—so like——

DUCHESS

Maybe it is a stanza that he says to all of us. Poets are peculiar creatures—they have

their lines by heart and insist upon repeating them, even at the wrong moment.

DEA [*staggers*]

Gwymplane, my love—for you are my love—I am terribly hurt somewhere—Let us go.

GWYMPLANE

[*Supporting* DEA *and turning to the* DUCHESS.]

You did not have your pleasure, I know, and——

DUCHESS [*pointing imperiously*]

Go, clown. I can add the situation up myself. No, I think I want another word with you.

[GWYMPLANE, *unheeding, tries to pass her with* DEA *upon his arm.*]

Fool, obey me, or embrace a peril that will choke you and your little friend of disobedience. Come, she shall await you in my private conservatory.

[*She makes a gesture as if to separate them.*]

GWYMPLANE

I shall go with her.

DUCHESS

Nay, suspect no more mousetraps. Lead her there yourself; see that she is comfortable among the candles and flowers, then return to me for your own interest and for hers.

[GWYMPLANE *leads* DEA *out door on left and returns.*]

You have had a strange evening for a mountebank—an evening filled with such events as to strain almost any amount of discretion.

GWYMPLANE

I shall not talk.

DUCHESS

Not of ourselves, of course. No man, not even a clown, but draws a veil across his rejected flesh.

GWYMPLANE

Well then?

DUCHESS

But in that spiritual condition which fol-

lows being repudiated your muscles will probably be seeking, straining, to express your mind and the direction will probably be to avenge your blind girl.

GWYMPLANE

All that in my own way, Madame.

DUCHESS

And your way will be? Come.

GWYMPLANE

Ah, Madame, I am weary of your commands. Over my actions you have a certain power, but, as my mind and what shall come out of it is still mysterious to me, I am afraid you must share the discomfort of my own ignorance.

DUCHESS [*in a more kindly tone*]

Listen to me, clown. You were brought to me tonight to relieve me of a whim, I admit that. And you brought me no relief.

GWYMPLANE [*with sophistication*]

The question interests me dispassionately, Madame. But, considering you waived my

personal defects [*he winces*], just why did I not—please you?

DUCHESS

But I told you before—I wanted a clown, and you talk like the very essence of all these lords and poets. But that is aside—I am to be married tomorrow.

GWYMPLANE

I know,—to him—and you wish him spared the public lash of scandal, I suppose.

DUCHESS

He need not be spared it entirely—I do not ask that. You can make plea to the Queen, if you wish, the day after the ceremony—only not tomorrow. Much rests on that for me.

GWYMPLANE

Madame, with the insolence of your class, you are asking favours of one whose degradation you have sought and shared.

DUCHESS

Perhaps, but you must remember that I am the sister of the Queen and can impose

obedience to the most insolent favours I choose to demand.

[*A loud knock from the door leading into the conservatory.* GWYMPLANE *starts towards the door. The* DUCHESS *holds him back.*]

Truly an eventful hour. [*she raises her voice*] Ah, what now?

VOICE OF THE QUEEN

I heard you were so indisposed you could not come to me even upon the most urgent matter.

[*The* DUCHESS *signifies with a gesture of fury that she is aware of being fatally played against. In the meantime the* QUEEN *is putting her own key into the lock.* JOSEPHINE *turns with supplication to* GWYMPLANE, *at length too afflicted by the situation to guard her poise.*]

DUCHESS

You would not talk like a clown. Be——I know you—a gentleman. Save me! Save us!

[*She points to a door.*]

In there—a blind closet. Do not attempt to escape or we shall hear you.

GWYMPLANE

[*Bowing low and casting an ironic eye upon the panic of the* DUCHESS.]

There is at least a peculiar variety in your demands, Madame——

[*The door barely closes upon him as the* QUEEN *enters continuing her speech.*]

QUEEN

Consequently, if you are too ill to attend the Queen, it is but human for the Queen to await anxiously upon you. But, my dear—

[*The* DUCHESS *is biting her lip with ill-concealed rage.*]

You do not look ill—you look angry. Have there been disturbing things?

[*She plucks the curtain aside, and lets it drop, but continues looking about her with assumed carelessness.*]

DUCHESS

Nothing more disturbing than being continually interrupted—I do not speak of your Majesty's visit—when I wished to remain undisturbed.

QUEEN

How annoying to have one's solitary reveries continually scattered by people hammering at the door. What did they all want? Who were they?

DUCHESS

There was Charles.

QUEEN

And after that?

DUCHESS

O, various people asking ridiculous questions.

[*She plucks a large bit of heliotrope from the bowl and bites it rather vengefully.*]

But, my sister, do confide in me the august matter that can necessitate your being abroad at such an unearthly hour.

QUEEN

There is no one that can overhear us? You have dismissed your servants?

DUCHESS

O, hours ago. [*rather insolently*] You may feel quite at your ease with me.

QUEEN

You will forgive my poking about, Josephine? But you are so vague—all artistic and beautiful natures are vague—you might easily have forgotten that Piccolo is hanging about somewhere waiting to carry a last good-night word to your impatient bridegroom. Why, there is a strange girl sitting at this very moment in your conservatory. Her face was somehow familiar.

DUCHESS [*commencing to be rather distracted*]

Ah, yes, a late hamper of my wedding clothes. The girl awaits for me to repay her pains for coming. But, indeed, your Majesty, I would be flattered if you would accept my word that we are alone here.

QUEEN

Dear child, naturally, I accept your conviction that there is no one about, but I do not trust your memory. I admire too much the artist in you for that. Ah! Do I hear someone scratching apologetically upon the window? [*smiling*] Really, no wonder your sense of privacy is outraged tonight.

DUCHESS

Who now?

PRINCE [*in a slightly frantic voice*]

I, Josephine. Did anyone pass in by this window a few minutes ago?

DUCHESS

[*Looking at the* QUEEN, *whose ironic countenance struggles with real emotion.*]

Who should? You perceive the curtains are drawn.

PRINCE

A girl—one of the troupe of mountebanks—a blind girl. Phedro brought her in with a most important letter for the Queen. He left her a moment, returned, and she was gone. He hesitated to disturb you at this late hour; so I told him I would come myself and ask.

QUEEN [*suddenly speaking in a tone of relief*]

Ah, with a note for me. Is it only that? For Heaven's sake, don't go on talking through a closed window, Charles. It gives such an air of tension to everything. Josephine, open the window to Charles.

[*Josephine obeys.*]

PRINCE

[*Stepping into the room so befogged with*

his own agitation as to have no room left for astonishment at the presence of the QUEEN.]

Josephine, your Majesty, are you quite sure——

DUCHESS

My dear Charles, do you think I am in the habit of not noticing the intrusion of perfectly strange women into my apartment at night?

PRINCE

Then you saw no one?

[DUCHESS *smiles enigmatically.*]

QUEEN [*addressing the* PRINCE]

Why are you so anxious that this message from the blind girl is delayed? Or are you just naturally upset about everything to-night, being so near the altar?

DUCHESS

Ah, yes, so near the altar. Tell me how have you spent these last free hours, Charles?

QUEEN

I hope you have spent them romantically, fingering a lute or something.

DUCHESS

Fingering something—was it a lute, Charles?

[CHARLES *glances at the* DUCHESS *in alarm. The* QUEEN *intercepts the look and grows a little uneasy herself.*]

QUEEN

You seem to be throwing dirt at one another out of a bonbonnière. I have a feeling I should extremely dislike to hear you actually explain yourselves. I wonder where Phedro is. He has hinted to me of extraordinary news for tonight. [*she opens the window and looks out*] And now it is almost dawn.

[*She calls* PHEDRO, *and opens the door through which she has entered the room, calling* PHEDRO.]

VOICE OF PHEDRO

Majesty, I come.

[*He enters. The* DUCHESS *gives him a fearful look, which he returns with a grim smile.*]

QUEEN

You promised significant news for me after

midnight and in the apartment of the Duchess. I have come. It is long beyond midnight. What have you to say?

PHEDRO

We are strictly in private, your Majesty?

QUEEN

Assure yourself. I had some feeling about it myself a few minutes ago.

[PHEDRO *steps at once to the door where the mountebank is concealed, but the* DUCHESS *with a haughty look actually forestalls him, opening the door herself.* GWYMPLANE *steps into the room. The* QUEEN *pretends to be speechless. The* PRINCE *is.*]

[*stiffly*] Your Grace, the Duchess of Beaumont will please explain.

DUCHESS

Oh, this mountebank was merely seeking the blind girl from his troupe, who had been admitted, or possibly abducted, into the palace.

QUEEN

Abducted, really? By whom? For whom?

DUCHESS [*with a glance at* CHARLES]

We do not know, but we guess possibly.

[*At the word "abducted"* GWYMPLANE *steps menacingly up to the* PRINCE. *The* QUEEN *catches the look of hauteur and hatred that is exchanged between them. She hastily discovers some growing discomfort from which she slides away in her usual fashion by pursuing another channel of thought.*]

QUEEN

Nevertheless, why does he seek his partner in your Grace's closet?

PRINCE

Josephine, good God—what are you?

DUCHESS

What you are or would be, Charles—a star of the nobility, shedding its single glory for the last time

QUEEN

Come, come, cease your language. Why was this mountebank in your Grace's closet?

DUCHESS

He flew to the nearest door in the opposite direction from whence came your Majesty's voice. I suppose he lost his head in his embarrassment. That is a quality of the lower classes.

QUEEN

Your answers are tedious evasions. They explain nothing save what you wish to conceal—your dishonour. [*she turns to* GWYMPLANE] Mountebank, I think you have ruined and frustrated the life of a most important personage in our court.

PHEDRO

Hold, hold. A bat has not torn a lily as you suppose, your Majesty.

QUEEN

No? Then what *has* happened, Phedro? And do drop your metaphor. We are not wise enough so late to do it justice.

PHEDRO

Two stars have blundered together, that is all. Her Grace the Duchess of Beaumont and His Highness Prince Ian of Vaucluse.

PRINCE

My brother? Here? But my brother is dead! Where can you have imagined to have seen my brother?

PHEDRO

[*Approaches* GWYMPLANE *making him a low bow.*]

Prince Ian of Vaucluse.

[GWYMPLANE, *as if he saw madness, loses the nervous control of his features by which he can efface his terrible grin, and his face grows convulsed with it.*]

QUEEN [*regarding him and laughing shrilly*]

Here is some monstrous joke devised by Phedro. Why, Josephine, if this were true, then he—the clown—would be your fiancé, nor have a right to reject you, since sharing in your rather disreputable offence. Ah, what folly! [*she places her hand upon her heart, gazing at* PRINCE CHARLES] But how I would like to credit the wildest phantasy tonight.

[*The* DUCHESS *is looking on disdainfully as if witnessing rather a boring farce.*]

PHEDRO [*looking intensely at the* QUEEN]

When the thing that we have longed for comes true, it may sound like madness. I have every credential to prove my extraordinary announcement.

QUEEN

[*Looking whimsically from one to another.*]

Ah, let us suppose for a moment, Josephine, that this were true. Surely you would be happy in a marriage so fortified by natural selection, and, as for Charles—the loss of certain things might be replaced by others.

[*She gazes at him tenderly.*]

DUCHESS

[*In a sudden outburst of confusion and ennui.*]

We are all gone mad. I feel as if we were in a web. I marry with a clown—the clown a lord—the lord a deformity. [*She shudders*]

GWYMPLANE

O, I cannot stand this hellish whirl another

instant. It is biting my ankles off and blinding my eyes in a red sting of madness.

[*He attempts to throw open the door.* PHEDRO *swiftly forestalls him with widespread arms and a grim expression;* GWYMPLANE *turns away bowed from his ferocity of pain and bewilderment, while* PHEDRO, *with an incredible, greased swiftness, lets himself out the door, and returns almost upon the instant with* DEA *terrified, supported on his arm.*]

PHEDRO [*turning suavely to* DEA]

My dear young lady, calm yourself. Where is the letter?

[DEA *takes it from her breast.* GWYMPLANE *looks at the letter in agonized amazement.*]

DEA

You said I was to give it to the Queen.

PHEDRO

You are in the presence of her Majesty.

[DEA *makes a low curtsey, and holds out the letter. The* QUEEN *takes it from her with a strange, stiff gesture.*]

Your Majesty, this is the missive sealing officially my tale.

QUEEN

[*Reads the letter, her face played upon by expressions varying from incredulity to ironic joy. Turning to* PHEDRO.]

There is no doubt about this?

PHEDRO [*turning a page*]

You note your Chancellor's signature.

QUEEN

[*Finishes the letter and stands looking intently ahead of her. She suddenly speaks in a rather strange voice.*]

I hate to be trite, but my inner laughter is far too loud to be tamed into wit; so I think I must use the stock phrase, and observe that truth is never so tedious as fiction. [*she passes her hand over her brow*] Come, clown, you may go, or rather my lord, you have my earnest leave to exchange our presence for the open air, while we sit in judgment over these discoveries. You may take the young lady with you, who apparently cannot

see [*with a bitter look at* CHARLES] the interest she evokes.

[GWYMPLANE *drags* DEA *out half fainting, but turns in the door, facing them all.*]

GWYMPLANE

Take care. It is dangerous to be marionettes too long—even now your limbs may be turning into sawdust.

[*They exit without paying the* QUEEN *respect.*]

QUEEN

[*Turning to* PRINCE CHARLES *and then to the* DUCHESS.]

How very uncomfortable he will make the House of Lords. Artists are terrible people, especially when they get out of their *métier*, and even if they were born gentlemen. [*she takes a hand of the* DUCHESS *and of* CHARLES] I request you both to be in my cabinet tomorrow morning as early as you can manage to rouse yourselves after this rather full evening, and we shall see what it is fair to do in love [*she glances softly and rather whimsically at the* PRINCE] and war. [*looking fixedly at* JOSEPHINE]

[*She throws both their hands away from*

her as if they had stung her. An equerry opens the door, and she exits abruptly.]

PRINCE *and the* DUCHESS [*bowing low to her departing back and murmuring*]:

Your Majesty is obeyed.

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

[It is night upon the deck of a small schooner, whose sails are outlined against leaden streaks, commencing to herald the dawn.

DEA *lies extended upon a low couch, beside the chair of* URSUS. *In the dim light her form possesses the eternal majesty of sculpture. From afar the voices of sailors chanting some sad litany of the sea.* URSUS *leans back in his chair, looking up into the face of departing night.* GWYMPLANE *paces in and out, anguished with unrest.*]

URSUS [*to* GWYMPLANE, *who hardly heeds him*]

Nothing follows us. It never occurred to them that a man should want to escape good fortune. They never think to bolt the door when they have gilded the walls. O, how profitably one can surprise these people who think the entire world reflects their contemplation of self.

GWYMPLANE

[*Who has not heard the preceding speech at all, comes in, halting abruptly.*]

Life, life. It has suddenly burst its leash—torn in among us like a mad dog and wounded us, mortally, I think. [*glances at* DEA] O, the pain, the tragedy that can come out of nonsense. Will Dea live, can Dea live?

URSUS [*sighing heavily*]

Perhaps, perhaps. How quiet and smiling she looks. There is some great pathos about her peacefulness as if Heaven were restoring to her something cruelly lost in this world.

GWYMPLANE

[*Walking over to her couch and wringing his hands.*]

My love, my little love.

[URSUS *rising and soothing his agonized posture with a gentle hand, which* GWYMPLANE *shakes off.*]

GWYMPLANE

Oh, there seems no corner in myself into which I can creep, pull down the blinds, and shut out those horrible, jeering, grotesque,

indecent processionals that I joined and made last night.

URSUS

My poor son! You threw your body to the jackals for an hour. You forgot there was a soul in your body to get mangled along with the rest.

GWYMPLANE

Oh, my soul was not in all that.

URSUS

Most people perish from thinking like you. [*earnestly*] Somewhere in you is a blinding, transfigured face, struggling up out of the sprawled, coiling limbs of infinite pasts, yet put it in certain conditions and it retains its fearful stamp of former bestiality. But during death, death the last condition we follow, what a likeness unto God appears upon the features of the worst of us.

GWYMPLANE [*who is too tortured to hear*]

Oh, how can I ever again catch at her lovely virginal hands? [*he lifts one very gently*] Her hands have the sudden beauty and strange fragrance of flowers that bloom among shad-

ows. How can I ever press my lips against them again without bruising their dear shy softness by this weight of unworthiness I carry within me?

URSUS

Only through hope.

GWYMPLANE

Hope is for people who have not such keen noses as I. I can smell the decay in myself far too well to go near the person I love with it. Only to sleep, to sleep, and not have to make my way any more, through these biting, malicious, stifling memories. How can a man's soul exist after he knows what sodden morasses the body can clamp him into!

URSUS

Stumbling may teach a man to hold his lantern nearer the ground.

GWYMPLANE

My arms are broken. They cannot hold anything except despair.

DEA [*stirring faintly*]

[URSUS *is immediately at her side and*

benas over her. GWYMPLANE *stands looking down over the back of her couch.*]

How fast we are going! What are we on that is moving so swiftly?

URSUS

We are sailing away, Dea, you, Gwymplane, and I, toward happiness and safety.

DEA

I have always been happy, until——

[*She puts her hand on her heart.* GWYMPLANE *winces.*]

URSUS [*speaking gently*]

Let me put my hand across your forehead and smooth you back into dreams as I used to when you were a child. That will be best.

DEA

I wonder, have I not passed what is best. You say that I am on a boat, but it seems to me I am going somewhere by myself, swiftly, eagerly, and that I am carrying my love for Gwymplane like a sheaf of lilies under my arm.

[GWYMPLANE *bends over, whispering*

her name out of the bursting anguish of his heart.]

Gwymplane, I feel your breath across my cheek. I feel your tears upon my face. Oh, why are you crying?

GWYMPLANE

My love, my dear love, there is too much beauty about you. You are an answer to the last wish of a man's heart that blows him over the gates of Paradise. Anyone would weep if the face of God were to shine out suddenly through their prayers.

DEA

Oh, I understand all that. I have felt that so often about you.

[*She puts her hand tenderly on his. Suddenly she raises herself on her elbow.*]

Gwymplane! Ursus! I think—I think I am about to see! There are bright stretches of colour beginning behind my eyes.

[*She lifts herself into a sitting position, stretching out her arms. There is a long pause.*]

O, I do see, I see!

[*She is looking up into the sky, which is becoming radiant with streaks of dawn.*]

I see a million pale ribbons fluttering through grey vapour. They are widening into rivers of colour, into vast dazzling spaces and some divine form is shining through now and sweeping all the darkness away off the world, with his golden wings.

GWYMPLANE [*turning ecstatically to* URSUS]

I believe she sees.

[*He suddenly cringes away from her, and speaks in a whisper to* URSUS.]

Maybe she will see me at last.

URSUS

She sees the sky of heaven.

[DEA *drops back upon* GWYMPLANE'S *arm.*]

GWYMPLANE [*with anguished apprehension*]

Oh, darling, do you still see? Do not stop speaking. Tell me more.

DEA

I cannot wait, I think, any longer.

GWYMPLANE

My love, then, if you are going before me, [*a strange look passes over his face—he straightens himself*] just a little before me, will you let fall some bright flowers from your breast that will make a track of light for me to follow in, so that we may perhaps waken together? O, love, how remote your beautiful face is becoming. Do you even hear me, I wonder.

DEA [*very low*]

I do hear. Gwymplane, come nearer. That night I tried to understand, but I thought with so much pain that I could not seem to understand. Now the pain is gone out of any thought and I understand now how little cause there was for pain.

GWYMPLANE

Beloved.

DEA

I know I am your beloved. Hold me close.

[*He wraps her frantically in his arms.*]

I want the blessing of your arms to be the last thing in my life.

[*Suddenly a look of recognition and joy*

floods her face, and her eyes seem to follow some divine approach. She murmurs]:

How beautiful! How right!

[*And fluttering in* GWYMPLANE'S *arms she is dead. He lays her gently back, lifts one of her hands, kisses it, looks at her as if the last agony had been drawn out of his soul, then passes his hand across his brow, tries to speak, and after a long pause:*]

GWYMPLANE

It appears we have made good our escape.

URSUS [*raising his head from his arms*]

The tide is with us.

GWYMPLANE

We are bound—where?

URSUS

Westward.

GWYMPLANE [*with tenderness*]

Dear Ursus, you were leaving your country and going to face old age among customs, languages, peoples, strange to you, and to save us from the talons of a pack of cards.

URSUS

You and I are going now, Gwymplane.

GWYMPLANE

I think I have no more knack for wearing costumes and masks, and I could not ask human beings to accept me as I am, either inside or out. Any reality is like a row of knives and each minute drags me backward and forward across them.

[*He seems to commune upon and decide something within himself. His voice breaks clearly over a long pause.*]

Good-night, Ursus, I am going up into the prow to seek some fresher air.

[URSUS *sits with his head on his arms, which are resting on* DEA'S *coverlet. There is a faint shrill of sighing wind, with the voices of the sailors rising beneath it, and the ascending sun commences to throw red bars across the water.*

Suddenly the singing voices cease abruptly and a sailor hurries in.]

SAILOR

Sir, sir, a man has fallen into the sea!

URSUS

[*Starting out of his lethargy and speaking in a strange, numb voice.*]

Then put the ship about. We return.

SAILOR

Shall we not lower boats and make search for this man—[*he shudders and crosses himself*] for this man who has fallen into the sea?

URSUS [*half to himself*]

Let a man rest where he has gone by his own will.

CURTAIN

Scene 3

[*An antechamber communicating with the* Queen's *bedroom.*]

1st Courtier

The air is very heavy this morning.

2d Courtier

It is as if the clouds had dropped down out of the sky, entered into this palace, and turned into leaden wheels, running over one, no matter where one hides.

3d Courtier

You are lucky to be able to talk. I am too depressed even to breathe.

1st Courtier

I am terribly depressed,—but I am still curious. What do you suppose it is all about?

2d Courtier

It is all about passions. There have been several conflicting kinds rushing through the

atmosphere lately. Naturally the sea is a bit choppy for our painted sort of barks.

[*He nods about him rather contemptuously.*]

3D COURTIER

You can at least talk no matter what happens.

1ST COURTIER

Well, we don't seem any nearer knowing the truth.

[*Enter two ladies in a state of great excitement.*]

1ST LADY

What could you have possibly expected? I suppose the marriage is off. Josephine could never be interested in anything, and as for the Prince——

2D LADY

His self-interest would push anything else out of him.

1ST LADY

Of course, if it *is* off, Josephine must have made him appear unbecoming and *she* prob-

ably brought all the candles in the palace to help illuminate Josephine's mistake. Phew! they are all quite dreadful.

1ST COURTIER

Sh! It is unwise to be so indiscreet, even in a crisis. Remember, we have to face each other, and all of these others every day for years. Perhaps the memory of your candour will make you feel a little ridiculous later.

[*Hand bell tinkles.*]

1ST LADY

The Queen's bell.

[*She goes to a door on right and timidly knocks.*]

THE QUEEN'S VOICE [*off stage*]

Is the Duchess attending me yet?

1ST LADY

No, Majesty.

QUEEN

Have me informed immediately upon her arrival. Until then, I wish you would discuss your absorbing trifles in a lower tone. My

room is exactly like a sounding board for your idle conversation. However, I tell you all this with a recurring regularity that none of the rest of my life seems to possess.

1st Lady

Your Majesty is obeyed, and our most humble apologies to your Majesty.

[*She closes the door softly.*]

Queen

You haven't shut the door. You haven't shut it tight. Oh, for Heaven's sake, slam it!

[*The court lady bangs the door with discretion.*]

1st Courtier [*whispering*]

What a humour she is in! What a woman of moods!

2d Courtier

She is illusive. She is like a succession of masks, seen at dawn. In her there always appears a terrible wanness, right upon the heels of a wonderful freshness.

3d Courtier

I don't wish to seem unpleasant, but I

wonder if you could talk a little less or say something.

2D COURTIER [*regarding him witheringly*]

I should advise you to go off by yourself and drink some *fleur d'oranger* and bathe your temples in *eau de cologne.* Isolation is the only resolution for such ill-humour.

1ST LADY

Wasn't the Duchess radiant last night? If the marriage is not off I hear she will give a dance, a very small one, to celebrate the first month of her marriage.

[*Suddenly she looks rather uncomfortable.*]

2D LADY

Ah, you are wondering, shall we be invited, considering we are the Queen's favourite ladies?

1ST COURTIER

If everything is all right, when the Duchess comes let us think of something especially charming to say to her. Something that will hint, without asserting, our warmer attachment. [*both ladies nod their approval*] Sh! Here's Phedro.

PHEDRO

[*Enters, looking for the first time during the play as if a ghost had sucked his blood.*]

Is the Queen up?

1ST COURTIER

She is awake, but wishes to remain undisturbed until the Duchess arrives.

PHEDRO

Ah, then I shall go and polish my bullet a little more officially.

[*They all stare at him in amazement.*]

But has not her Grace been tearing the Queen's curtains back at dawn?

1ST LADY

No, why should she be? What has happened?

[*They all crowd around him.*]

A LADY

The air seems sizzling with lightning. Tell us, has the Queen done her some rudeness again? We were just saying how charm-

ing she was and thinking of how to express our admiration to her on her arrival.

PHEDRO

Don't disturb your vocabulary for the sake of the Duchess.

LADIES AND COURTIERS [*in one voice*]

Why, what has happened?

PHEDRO

The Duchess does not exist any longer.

A COURTIER

She is dead?

2D COURTIER

Artemis has risen to hunt, but in heaven—

3D COURTIER

Good God! [*he gradually recovers himself*] What a shame the classics are taught. It lends a pulpit to such tedious people.

A LADY

Oh, we must know, if we are to live. What has happened to the Duchess?

PHEDRO [*grimly—with finality*]

She has become *déclassée.*

[*Everybody grows gradually stupefied.*]

A LADY [*only partially recovering*]

You mean that she left the door open? Or mislaid one of her jewels somewhere?

OTHER LADY [*just able to murmur*]

You would suggest that she permitted herself to be—discovered?

PHEDRO

Yes, her apartment was honeycombed with indiscretions.

1ST COURTIER [*sharply*]

But what did that matter? Who plucked them out?

PHEDRO

The Queen

3D COURTIER

What an appalling mischance!

A Lady

It is an outrage! People who are lazy enough to be found out are a menace to all of us.

3D Courtier

A gentleman will hardly know where he is safe when the Duchess of Beaumont can allow such an occurrence.

Phedro

I am afraid I must make my exit from this troubled surface and scrutinize more silent things. [*Pause. Half to himself*] I wonder how a man looks who has slept well among the touch and glide of fishes.

A Lady

What sort of horrible, wriggly thing are you saying, Phedro?

Phedro

I am tasting my own cooking. It is delicious. However, enough public reverie. When the Duchess comes, announce her to the Queen in whatever manner fits your inclination. Take a good breath of bad manners. It will refresh you all. [*he glances at*

his watch] Ah, I shall be late for a certain melancholy addition of facts.

LADIES

What facts?

PHEDRO

You shall see. I have only read you the prologue.

[*He exits, almost bumping into the* DUCHESS, *who sweeps by him into the room. The courtiers stand about perfectly limp, enjoying their indifference.*]

DUCHESS

I am present. [*half turning*] Kindly acquaint her Majesty with that fact.

A LADY

[*Starts to courtesy, but suddenly remembers that she doesn't have to.*]

Very well, you can wait here.

[*The* DUCHESS *looks at her with incredulous amazement. Suddenly the voice of the* QUEEN *is heard.*]

QUEEN

Is that the Duchess?

THE LADY

It is, your Majesty.

QUEEN

Tell her to wait where she is. I shall be with her presently. Meanwhile you may disperse without formalities.

LADY

Your Majesty is obeyed.

[*She comes back into the room and together with all the rest gazes insolently at the* DUCHESS *as they file out. The* DUCHESS *stands, staring frigidly ahead of her and looking supremely beautiful.*]

DUCHESS [*clenching her hands slightly*]

Fools! They would look better without their heads.

[*Enter the* QUEEN, *looking extremely pale and serious, evidently on the verge of some personal climax.*]

QUEEN

My sister.

DUCHESS

Your Majesty?

[*They bow formally to one another, then remain silent a little.*]

QUEEN

O, what is the sense of trying to carry a meeting like this off? I have been too astonished lately to hold on to my *savoir faire*. Here are my explosions in a nutshell. The announcement that the clown Gwymplane is the Prince of Vaucluse I am satisfied is authentic. He is in consequence your *fiancé*.

DUCHESS [*losing her wits in a temper*]

You must be mad to suppose I should really marry with a mountebank, a deformity, no matter what he has been born.

QUEEN

Evidently you forget the position you enjoy entails implicit obedience.

[*The* DUCHESS *is about to break out.*]

Please don't be banal. I couldn't bear to hear you say that your life was slavery. Your life is merely idiotic. Slaves were sturdy,

magnificent people who understood massage, and you look as if a powder puff could blast you off the earth.

DUCHESS

You hate me!

QUEEN

But you know that I knew you knew that.

DUCHESS

When Charles comes, or perhaps you don't permit him to come—possibly it would annoy you to see the anguish he will be in over me.

QUEEN

Vain people have the most curious faith in the unselfishness of everybody else. Ah, here comes the bone of contention, looking remarkably bright.

[*Enter* PRINCE. *He bends over the* QUEEN'S *hand and gazes up into her eyes, speaking with a new thrill in his voice.*]

PRINCE

My gracious cousin, I hope your health matches this exquisite morning.

QUEEN [*abruptly pointing*]

There is Josephine. Give her some of your after-breakfast optimism.

PRINCE

Ah!

[*He bows rather distantly over* JOSEPHINE'S *hand that is extended with unusual cordiality.*]

DUCHESS

Charles, my dear, don't let us be absurd. Last night was a fantastic heaping of mischance.

PRINCE

You are neat in phrases, Josephine, but exactly what do they mean? And please don't sulk—only well-loved people can afford to do that.

DUCHESS

If you dare to presume to criticize me, I will——

QUEEN

[*Looks nervously at* PRINCE, *who interposes quickly.*]

PRINCE

My dear Josephine, I could not bear to have you hold me responsible for these grotesque discoveries of last night. Apparently he is my brother, and it should have been me who suffered those terrible deformities save for the mischievous meddling of a malicious servant; but certainly now you are his lawful bride, and I have no other name than one the Queen's mercy can devise.

JOSEPHINE

But your Majesty will do something for us, after all, we love each other!

PRINCE

[*Looks at* JOSEPHINE *over the edge of his buttonhole, into which his nose becomes completely submerged.*]

Do you love me this morning, Josephine?

DUCHESS

You loved me last night.

PRINCE [*sighing*]

I think there has always been something a little angular in our relations and now that

it has become my duty to relinquish you, I rather fancy there is no harm in assuring you it is also my pleasure.

[*A momentary look of pity for* JOSEPHINE *crosses the* QUEEN'S *countenance, replaced by an obvious flow of childish joy.*]

QUEEN

You have not really cared, but——

PRINCE

Save for—but it is so very early and bright, and we are not alone.

DUCHESS

So sorry to be in the way. I shall hope to be dismissed presently. I can hear you are tuning up, Charles. Ah, well, I shall have a clown for a husband. What more should a married woman wish for? And plenty of time to catch the roses and the sighs wafting up from my gardens. But Charles, where is your little blind girl?

PRINCE

How should I know? She found the Queen and delivered her note.

QUEEN

How did you know she had a note to deliver?

PRINCE

I ran into her with Phedro coming through the garden. He went to see if all was right with Josephine, while I——

DUCHESS

Mingled hands, at least, for she said: "He told me that he wanted me for himself and forever, nor was he the Court Steward, for he wore a great oblong stone upon his hand." I hope she comes back with my intended, and tells to your Majesty the story of Charles's little lapse into the romantic. O, listening to her one must believe her, for she has all that obvious lack of fancy only to be found among rarely good people. Her face is quite open and classic, unbroken by the slightest hint of imagination. A lie couldn't possibly twist up through such regular lines.

QUEEN

[*Over her face has gradually grown a singular change.*]

Mingling hands, ah, that was why—[*she*

bites her lip, passing her hand across her brow.] However, to that later. Josephine—[*in a kinder tone*] I have made you acquainted with our disposition. Go now and prepare to become the Duchess of Vaucluse.

[JOSEPHINE *is about to exit, when* PHEDRO *enters hurriedly.*]

PHEDRO

Your Majesty.

QUEEN

Oh, what an air of rush there is about everything this morning. Well, speak, speak.

PHEDRO

Her Grace cannot become the Duchess of Vaucluse.

QUEEN

Ah, why not?

PHEDRO

He is beyond us.

QUEEN

Do you mean that he has sought for himself, the only satisfactory rest!—a sleep without dreams. He is dead!—How?

PHEDRO

The philosopher and the blind girl escaped with him at dawn; long before sunrise an old, disused hulk was seen going down the river, and in the blaze of this morning has returned with only the philosopher and his hired oarsmen. Apparently the blind girl died from the tremors of escape, and the clown in his grief found nothing left in himself to face life with, so he threw his distressed person into the sea.

QUEEN

So, Josephine, your second bridegroom has been seduced away from you by Destiny. Charles, your fortune, which was at any rate confiscate to your brother, now passes to the Crown. I wonder just how you will manage.

[CHARLES *throws her a tender, confident look which she evades.*]

But one thing at a time. Josephine, what occurs to you in this fitful moment?

DUCHESS

Life nauseates me so at the moment that it is difficult to imagine any corner where I would not be too dizzy with hatred to stand. If you will permit me, I shall return to my

rooms to think. There are some agreeable things scattered through my rooms that may possibly inspire direction.

QUEEN

Your sensations, Josephine, they have always been so much more acute than your emotions. I wonder if you could not turn with a certain surprising equanimity from regarding the marble forms of your Greeks to the Gothic saints of wood and ivory, then one would detect incense in the fold of your shroud instead of patchouli in the pleats of your cambric. You know, probably you could find in the distortions of religious mania a perfect *pendant* to your taste for deformities in life.

DUCHESS

You are cruel, and you are irreverent.

QUEEN

Ah, my dear, in that last epithet speaks your extreme desirability for the vocation, superstition, which is nothing more nor less than fear of reason, or possibly a certain instinct that the truth would make everything look rather second class—if one is second class one's self.

DUCHESS

I suppose it is not incumbent upon me to stand here in order that my character inspire you with further Socratic comment.

QUEEN

Not at all, my dear sister; by all means seek your fauns and draperies and forgive me for prattling on quite regardless of sowing the tragic seed—*ennui.*

[*At this juncture it is only the intense refinement of the* DUCHESS *which prevents her from falling into the unbecoming posture of powerless invective.* PHEDRO, *who has listened to the foregoing, presumes here to interrupt.*]

PHEDRO

Your Majesty, have I your permission to retire?

QUEEN [*turning vaguely toward him*]

Certainly, certainly, Phedro. It must be extremely fatiguing to keep on hitting, one after another, so many peculiar facts.

PHEDRO [*bowing low*]

My position in your Majesty's service is

far too exhilarating to permit of fatigue. To breathe is occasionally difficult [*his voice lowers to something resembling a hiss*], consequently to rest does not occur.

[*He glances about him as if at a group of neatly despatched marionettes—a glare of furtive hatred distorting his features, which is hastily veiled by his usual laconic humility.*

The QUEEN *precipitates his departure with a wave of her hand, to which he instantly submits.*]

[*Exit* PHEDRO.]

DUCHESS

[*Resuming in a voice of excessive boredom.*]

Well, adieu, Charles, I suppose you will go on alternating between vice and sentimentality until the curtain drops. You know, one reason why you never attracted me?

PRINCE

Josephine, is this quite in taste?

DUCHESS

Taste is something one uses on arranging one's rooms, not upon human beings.

QUEEN

Well hit, Josephine. You have at least the satisfaction of going out to the ringing of the bull's eye.

DUCHESS

Possibly.

[*She exits after courtseying to the* QUEEN, *who returns it in proper measure. There is a silence.* PRINCE *looks tenderly at the* QUEEN, *who moves about in a rather staccato manner, disturbing perfectly placed bibelots and pieces of furniture.*]

PRINCE

We are alone at last.

QUEEN

That word should sound like the fold of wings around one's exhausted body.

PRINCE [*archly*]

Substitute arms for wings, and could for should, if I may be permitted to correct——

QUEEN

Oh, Charles, don't woo me with this poetic verbosity to take the place of feeling. It is

so exactly what you would say to the brewer's daughter, had you selected her to save your estate and pay your bills.

PRINCE

Ah, Anne, Anne, why will you be so ironic?

QUEEN

Once or twice I thought of not being ironic, of looking into some person's eyes, and not finding that I had to look away, of resting with someone in a long silence full of exchanged beauties.

PRINCE [*approaching her*]

Anne, dear, how——

[*The* QUEEN *laughs and backs away from him, where he stands with his arms stretched out towards her. In her laugh suddenly there is a slight sob.*]

QUEEN

Stand that way another instant, Charles. Ah, here is everything I have wanted, schemed for, wept about, in the position I have dreamt of it. [*She glances out at the park.*] The back drop is perfect also. Birds'

song, the freshness of morning, sunlight, youth,—youth to be gotten through somehow. However, here it all is, a dream—and not turning pale as all the others did in daylight. Yet, strangely enough, I cannot find a self in me to come forward and take these things as they are now.

PRINCE

Anne, Anne, for God's sake—I swear to you I can explain everything.

QUEEN

Try not to let your fear of personal consequences intercept the pity you should feel for me.

PRINCE

Anne, I love you, I love you.

QUEEN

Why, why is it that people cannot watch anything die in silence? I suppose after all you are not sufficiently ruthless to carry off your own selfishness with any sort of dignity.

PRINCE [*sulkily*]

You do not believe me. You credit the

report of a woman who has every reason to hate me.

QUEEN

No, I credit intuition, instinct that is always stinging past what one wants to think and flinging some dismantled idol across one's feet. Somehow, from looking down at a lie one can never look up to that particular thing again.

PRINCE

It was the lie you minded more than what I did.

QUEEN

I think a truth, no matter of what kind, would have given me some point of exhilaration upon which to try you out.

PRINCE

Oh, Anne, I do not understand you.

QUEEN

It is as well we found out. How jocosely casual we are about our spirits. We tie them into some bondage of eternity for the security of a night's lodging, and then wonder that

life grows sour upon our palate. [*she smiles over at* CHARLES'S *bewilderment*] Which means, in the literal terms of those who credit reincarnation, that if we married, those things you would have to do to keep your heart up would cause your next showing to degenerate into a slight motion of slime at the base of mountains. Think of the distance lost, Charles, for such a little mincing forward step. Come, the morning wanes. Fortunately there are things to do, no matter what cannot be done. I shall return you half of your fortune, which, you will remember, is wholly confiscate to the Crown, but upon the condition that you pass the fleeting future from well under my nose. I could not bear to be incessantly reading my past, which is printed all over you in large letters. Really, Charles, you are a shifting mass of monuments to the hope of a ridiculous person.

PRINCE

You have broken my heart. I may as well go, I suppose.

QUEEN

Thank God, I have a literal mind, for what you have said, as you have said it, literally

means, "I see you have found me out, so I suppose there is no use wasting any more time around here."

PRINCE

You are impossible. You think too quickly.

QUEEN [*smiling broadly*]

Charles, Charles, go now, now, while I am smiling at you. It will be nice to remember our saying good-bye and smiling.

[*She comes to him, takes his hand, looks up at him, but he will not let his face be natural. She smooths his face, apparently looking for some effect of Nature. Finally his features do relax into a rather sheepish, furtive smile.*]

Ah, now, I see you do not want to talk about it any more, and you do want to get right away. There, go.

[*She pushes him toward the door, and out through it, and he is heard remonstrating with her down the hallway. In a few seconds she re-enters with his boutonnière in her hand. She looks rather strangely about her, and presses his flower to her mouth.*]

QUEEN

My child, my love, it had to be good-bye this time.

[*Far in the distance the air of "Clair de Lune" is being played upon myriad guitars and flutes.*]

CURTAIN